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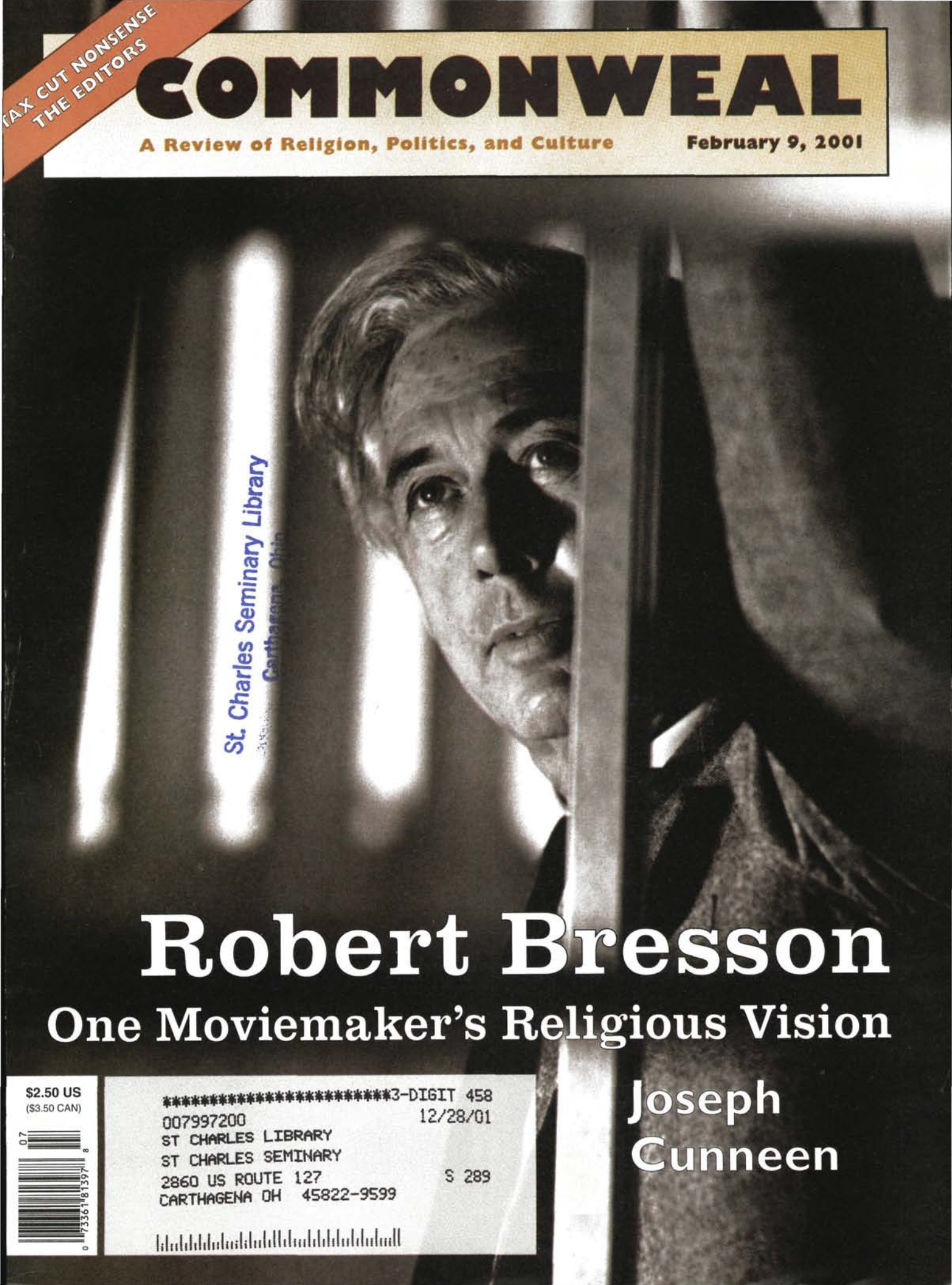
COMMONWEAL

A Review of Religion, Politics, and Culture

February 9, 2001



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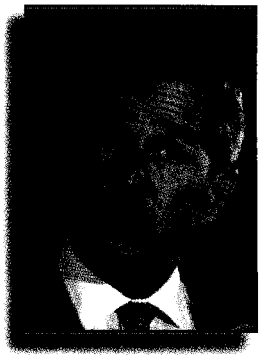

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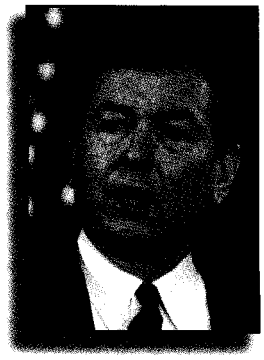

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COMMONWEAL

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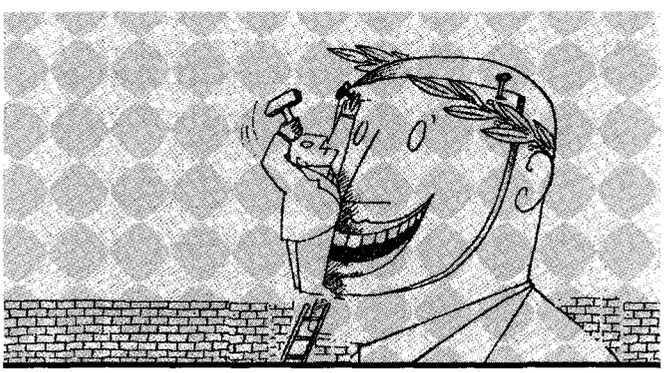

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To the Editors

A clarification

In my letter inquiring about the church's agenda regarding a sexual orientation that it considers objectively disordered, the editors of *Commonweal* replied, "We doubt that the official church is supporting research to eliminate gays through genetic surgery, or otherwise" (January 12, 2001). I never stated, or implied, that the church is supporting research to eliminate gays (human persons)! Moreover, as you are well aware, a sexual orientation is only one component of the totality of personhood. My inquiry was directed toward the implications of the current, official institutional position of the church. Simply stated: How will it respond, assuming no change in its present stance on nonheterosexual orientations, if the cause(s) of such orientations are uncovered in the future and subsequently the orientations themselves are subject to change within the canons of acceptable ethical norms? The principal issue, of course, is how to interpret orientation itself. The polarities of views on this question range from the "objectively disordered" to "a gift of God." As noted in the original letter, until such time as the church can adopt a more neutral stance on the interpretation of the orientation itself, the dialogue will remain one of defensive posturing.

ROBERT J. COMISKEY
Springfield, Va.

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This prize honors the best new article in theology on pastoral ministry. Each year the winning essay is published in *New Theology Review* and, along with the award, the author receives $2,000.

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Hoping & praying

I thoroughly enjoyed Jerry Ryan's "1054 & All That" (January 12, 2001). In looking at the ecumenical movement, Ryan pointed out real possibilities and opportunities to come together and share our faith without our traditions inhibiting our worship and dialogue. I hope and pray that I will be able to see this happen in my lifetime.

BEN SHAFER
Chicago, Ill.

Sex & the pope

Luke Timothy Johnson has gotten it right ("A Disembodied 'Theology of the Body,'" January 26, 2001)!

As an educator of adolescents and a married mother of three, I have searched for writings that present a balanced view of the gift of sexuality, including both its pleasurable and difficult aspects.

Johnson is careful to be inclusive of concerns of men and women, heterosexual and homosexual, single and married. It is rare to find this in a single voice.

Johnson is also sensitive to the hidden sexist underpinnings of much of the current church teaching and to the basic logical flaws in many of its supportive arguments.

It would be excellent for Johnson to expand these topics and to open the dialogue for those who would join him in his plea for a revisiting of *Humanae vitae.*

CINDY NOLAN
Lincolnshire, Ill.

Not for the lukewarm

"A Disembodied 'Theology of the Body'" reminded me to look again at C.S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity* and his comparison of contemporary sexuality and gluttony. It would be interesting to see an article explaining why the analogy is unreasonable. Why is contraceptive intercourse not like the Romans' vomitorium? Could someone explain that to me? Or again, has anyone demonstrated that dissent from *Humanae vitae* has produced more stable and faithful marriages? I sure would like to know.

(REV.) ANTHONY DI RUSSO
Greenville, N.H.

Who needs it?

The January 26 issue was the last straw. My thought was: with my weak faith, do I really need to read discussions about the deficiencies in the Catholic church as perceived by others? I have enough questions of my own.

The article by Luke Timothy Johnson attempts to take Pope John Paul II to task, thereby defining his deficiency, for not showing some "appreciation for the goodness of sexual pleasure."

After thinking about the article, I concluded that it produced some very thought-provoking ideas. If I have an open mind to the Bible and to the magisterium, then those ideas can result in very wholesome and faith-strenghening thoughts. Where else can you get all this for $44 per year? I'm sending in my check today.

And by the way, for what it's worth from a nontheologian, I think the advertisers, media, celebrities and population in general, promote "the

(Continued on page 30)

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Taxing rhetoric

To the surprise of many Americans, George W. Bush delivered an elegant inaugural address on January 20. In calling for civility, courage, compassion, and character, he spoke to the desire of many for greater national comity and citizen accountability. President Bush insisted that we take our responsibilities seriously both in this country and in the world, reminding us that "compassion is the work of a nation, not just a government." He urged that we think of ourselves as "citizens, not spectators." There was much to applaud in Bush's brief address, though to his credit, the president did not play his lines for easy applause.

Yet, as carefully crafted as the speech was in its appeal for the nation "to seek a common good beyond your comfort, to defend needed reforms against easy attacks, to serve your nation, beginning with your neighbor," it also exposed the contradictions embedded in the Republican agenda—contradictions that belie the president's appeal to the common good.

Take the promised tax cuts: the first and almost only extended round of applause during Bush's speech went to the reiteration of his campaign promise to cut taxes. In a time of budget surpluses, it is an offer that few will resist. Yet everything that the Bush administration hopes to accomplish, from education reform to modernizing the military to providing Medicare prescription coverage, may depend on marshaling resources that lie in those surpluses, to say nothing of all that needs doing and currently goes unattended.

Paul O'Neill, secretary of the treasury, acknowledged at his confirmation hearings the high priority a tax cut has in the new administration. Indeed, the promised cut of $1.6 trillion was the first order of business in the Senate the Monday after inauguration day. And Alan Greenspan's mixed blessing a few days later (cut, but not too much; the deficit could reemerge if surpluses fail to materialize) was taken by Republicans as an order to move full speed ahead. Many of the details for cuts are still to be worked out and they may prove to be more prudent and equitable than they sounded during the campaign. Absent the particulars, examine and consider the justifications for the cuts frequently repeated by Bush and Company: "The surplus belongs to the taxpayer, not to the government. Taxpayers know better than the government how to spend their money."

But do we?

As many economists have pointed out, there appears to be little economic justification for tax cuts that will kick in after the current slowdown has ended. In the immediate future, the Federal Reserve's lowering of interest rates is likely to work more smoothly and more quickly. Furthermore, down the line the cuts could turn out to be inflationary, bringing back the huge deficit that the Clinton administration inherited from the last Republican interregnum and finally tamed with the discipline supplied by the aforementioned Alan Greenspan. Reducing the federal deficit used to be a Republican mantra.

Instead, Bush instinctively appeals to a hardy American prejudice: taxation is a form of confiscation. When the metaphor is theft, tax cuts are taken as a form of restitution. That bias leads directly to another: the government that governs least

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governs best (except for military spending). On those maxims, Ronald Reagan leveraged the country during the 1980s into its biggest deficit ever. Where is the common good, or the common sense, in this?

There are some activities and responsibilities that only a national government can assume; when it fails to assume them, the needs simply go unmet. Chronic funding shortages at the State Department hobble our ability to conduct foreign policy. Minimal support of international bodies and foreign aid is stingy, counterproductive, and unjust. Airline safety, a secure food supply, drug testing and regulation—to name only a few of the most basic government responsibilities—all show the continuing effects of the cutbacks imposed during the Reagan administration. Certainly there is no point or virtue in defending bloated government bureaucracies, but when government officials lack the personnel and resources to carry out and supply the most basic "common goods," it is the citizenry itself that ultimately pays the price. (Note: we do not even mention the potential need for increased welfare and unemployment funds, and increased health-care spending, should the economy sink.)

In fact, taxpayers don't always know better how to spend their money, because they often can't see the larger picture or focus on what needs to be done. The tax cuts Bush proposes are very likely to be plowed into consumer goods when that money is actually needed "to seek a common good beyond your comfort."

Bush should listen more carefully to his own inaugural address. In another elegant sentence, he urged Americans to "show courage in a time of blessing, by confronting problems instead of passing them on to future generations." Exactly.

One of the first tasks of the new administration should be to conjoin its rhetoric with reality.

ET CETERAS

There will always be an England ■ British Prime Minister Tony Blair is soon expected to call elections. To energize working-class Labor Party members, he introduced a bill banning fox hunting with hounds, a leisure-time activity of the gentry, indeed, of the queen herself. The measure, long supported by the Left and animal-rights groups, will give an air of class struggle to the campaign. The House of Commons passed the measure 387–174; it will go to the House of Lords where there will be fierce but meaningless debate since the Lords can no longer veto legislation.

A blue-ribbon commission, in examining claims that hunting helped control an oversized fox population, found that—according to a report in the *Washington Post* (January 18)—"hunting with hounds is the cruelest of all control mechanisms....After noting that packs of dogs chase the fox until it drops from exhaustion and then rip the animal apart limb by limb, the commission concluded that 'this experience seriously compromises the welfare of the fox.'" The legislation also bans hunting rabbits, deer, and mink with hounds.

Apparently there will always be an England, class struggle, and Reynard the Fox and Peter Rabbit too.

Hot or not? ■ "How hot am I?" If you've ever asked yourself that question, here's a Web site for you: www.AmIHotOrNot.com. You can upload pictures of yourself and be rated by visitors to the site. When the home page appears you are greeted with an image of a man or a woman underneath a beauty ballot. Your attractiveness will be rated on a scale of one to ten—ten for hot, one for not. A plea beneath the photo reads "Please help keep this site FUN, CLEAN, and REAL."

AmIHot.com, a similar site, has personal ads with each photo. One member lists among her hobbies "drinking/getting drunk," "wrestling," and "building sand castles." What a woman.

The site has inspired copycats of several varieties. AmIGeekOrNot.com asks "How much of a geek are you? Submit your picture and find out!" Others range from political satire ("Am I President or not?") to the philosophical ("Am I an existentialist or not?"). Some, like "Am I capable of understanding basic logic or not?" are nasty—a Bush/Cheney campaign poster is the first image you see—while others are plain bizarre ("Am I interested in weather shielding for my brickwork or not?"). Even nihilists can find a home in cyberspace at the Web site "Am I not or not?"

AmICatholicOrNot.com hasn't yet emerged. Sources close to the curia claim the Vatican is in talks with AOL/Time Warner to develop a site. In the coming months, look for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to issue norms for a Catholic Internet rating system, tentatively titled *Ex corde Webesiae.*

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NOTEBOOK

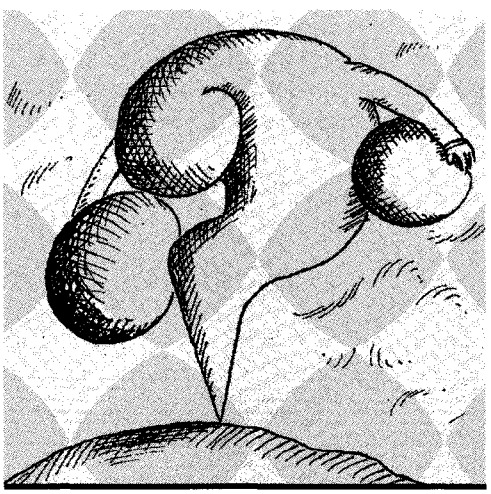
SANCTIONS ON IRAQ

Ten years & counting

Last month, a wave of medical concern raised a hot debate in Western Europe. It was related not to mad cow disease but to depleted uranium-tipped shells fired by NATO in Bosnia (1994–95) and Kosovo (1999). Did they cause a growing number of cancer- and leukemia-related deaths among NATO veterans? U.S. and British experts say no; other Western Europeans are not so sure. In addition, a UN inquiry in Kosovo had found that eight of eleven areas where the shells had been used were still contaminated with low-level radiation. Samples are being examined for toxicity in five European countries, and an official assessment is expected in March.

During the Gulf War (1991), more than 900,000 rounds of such ammunition were fired (compared to 31,000 rounds in Kosovo and 11,000 in Bosnia). According to a series published last fall in the *Hartford Courant* (October 22–25, 2000), birth defects in Iraq have nearly tripled since the end of the war, raising the issue of whether the use of depleted uranium-tipped weapons bears greater scrutiny there. One Canadian expert, the *Courant* reported, has warned of likely lung cancers developing among Gulf War veterans.

Even more stark than the effect of radioactive contaminants on veterans and local populations, however, is another, continuing action against Iraq. On average, 5,000 Iraqi citizens have died each month since the war, according to the *Courant*, as the result of UN sanctions leveled against the regime of Saddam Hussein. While the *Courant* series in no way exonerated Hussein for his failure to meet UN requirements, and blistered him for refusing to release humanitarian aid to the Iraqi people, nonetheless it reported that during the period sanctions have been in place, per-capita annual income in Iraq has dropped from $3,500 to $750; per-capita daily protein intake has fallen from 81.6 grams to 53.3 grams, landing the country on the list of nations endangered by malnutrition; and mortality rates for children under five have quadrupled (UNICEF estimates some 500,000 premature deaths in that subgroup). Furthermore, since widespread water contamination persists, a result of bombed-out infrastructure and the curtailment of chemical production and importation, dysentery and gastroenteritis are rampant, affecting both the old and the young. Polio, meningitis, and typhoid—all nearly eradicated before the war—are also on the rise, and cases of cholera quadrupled between 1997 and 1999, from 486 to 2,398.



Writing in the May / June 1999 issue of *Foreign Affairs*, John and Karl Mueller describe comprehensive state sanctions as an "impressive method" of mass destruction. At the same time, they argue that the UN's sanctions have neither undermined Hussein's will to survive nor significantly weakened his hold on power. In March 2000, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan openly expressed concern about sanctions on Iraq. He described them as a blunt instrument which "hurt large numbers of people who are not their primary targets." According to Dennis Halliday, the UN's former coordinator of aid to Iraq, the UN embargo has "pushed the Iraqi people back toward Saddam," undermining the sanctions' stated goal. Halliday warns that although the sanctions have failed to dislodge Hussein, they have turned a whole generation of younger Iraqis against the West, creating a veritable breeding ground for future extremists.

Such facts are slowly beginning to dawn on the American public. A year ago, seventy members of Congress sent President Bill Clinton a bipartisan letter stating that the UN sanctions offered the Iraqi government little incentive to comply. Drawn up by Tom Campbell (R-Calif.) and John Conyers (D-Mich.), the letter argued that "morally, it is wrong to hold the Iraqi people responsible for the actions of a brutal and reckless government." But that was last January. Since then there have been an additional sixty thousand sanction-related deaths—more than the number of U.S. casualties in Vietnam—and there has been a change in U.S. administrations. The new one is likely to take a harder line toward Iraq. As a candidate, George W. Bush called for a strengthening of sanctions, and Hussein will no doubt be a primary focus of Bush's foreign policy—in terms of energy security and family honor.

More than three years ago, Bishop Anthony Pilla, then president of the U.S. Catholic bishops' conference, wrote to Patriarch Raphael Bidawid of Baghdad, his Iraqi counterpart, saying that while the international community held the Iraqi government accountable for threatening the peace, world leaders must not "hold the Iraqi people hostage or harm innocent people." Pilla noted that the UN sanctions should be "reviewed, reshaped, and narrowed to achieve their legitimate objectives of ending threats to peace," and promised that the American bishops would hold the Iraqis' sufferings "in our hearts and prayers." Three years (and many prayers) later, the sanctions remain in force, scarcely reshaped or narrowed. One is forced to ponder: If the purpose of sanctions is to oust Saddam Hussein, are they working? If not yet, when might they? And morally, if not politically and militarily, when do sanctions become objectionable? If not in ten years, in fifteen? Twenty?...And who is doing the counting?

PATRICK JORDAN

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PAUL BAUMANN

CATHOLICISM & ANTI-SEMITISM

An evening with James Carroll & Mary Gordon

When it comes to Catholic bashing—and especially pope bashing—the novelist Mary Gordon is in a class of her own. I caught her last month at the Interfaith Center of New York. (No small irony in the title of that venue.) Gordon was there to "pay homage" to James Carroll, who was launching the publicity tour for his new book, *Constantine's Sword: The Church and the Jews, A History.*

As *Commonweal*'s reviewer Robert Louis Wilken persuasively showed (January 26), Carroll's book is deeply flawed, especially his insistence that any traditional Christian understanding of the Crucifixion is inherently anti-Semitic. It's not hard to play to the worst suspicions of those who are either wholly ignorant of Catholicism or passionately disaffected from the church. Carroll, a laicized priest, has done that too often in upscale magazines and newspapers like the *New Yorker*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, and the *Boston Globe*. God knows, the history of Christian anti-Semitism is horrible, but Carroll is not the first or the most authoritative to write about those crimes. Still, he was one of the more reasonable people in the crowded room at the Interfaith Center. Goaded on by Gordon, the crowd turned the evening into an orgy of anti-Catholic speechifying.

"I think he's too easy on the pope," Gordon began her remarks about Carroll's book, which, incidentally, does acknowledge that John Paul II has done more than any other pope to bring Catholics and Jews together.

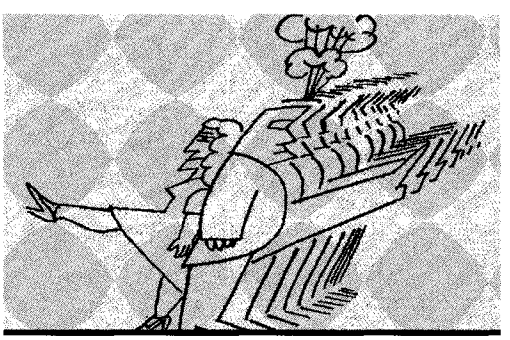
"I think we need to remember that John Paul II is a consummate actor and a media expert," Gordon said. "I think he's a dangerous figure. I think he's done an enormous amount of harm."

Gordon was particularly incensed over the beatification of Pius IX and John Paul II's support for Pius XII's canonization. I share that skepticism. But her reaction lacked any sense of proportionality. One doesn't denounce the state of Israel, for example, because of the passing (we hope) popularity of Ariel Sharon. Larger things are at stake than one politician's cynicism or one pope's bad decisions.

John Paul II's agenda, Gordon told the audience, is to return the church to its triumphalist past. His widely praised overtures, such as his apology for historic violence against the Jews, his visit to Israel, and his pilgrimage to the Western Wall, are a fraud and a lie. "I am not moved by him kneeling at the wall," she boasted. "It cost him nothing.... It's simply too easy. And I believe it is a greater insult to the murder of the Jews than if he had simply been silent."

John Paul II's behavior in relation to the Jews is "simply an outrage," she said.

All of this appeared to go down very well with those in the room. The first question—or rather speech—from the audience was a stem-winder that started out expressing doubt over the possibility of change in the church and descended into a rant on the Catholic origins of civil violence around the world, the sinister immigration policy of the church, and predictably enough, the Catholic overpopulation problem. It was enough to make a Catholic speed home with the intention of reuniting the pro-



creative and unitive dimensions of the conjugal act.

Well, almost enough.

A smug, liberal caterwauling animated the evening. Downright hilarious, though, was Gordon's analysis of the nature of faith in a postmodern age.

"One of the joys and burdens of being alive today is that we know too much," she said. Postmodern people know that there is not just one truth, and consequently must embrace what she called the "challenge of de-evangelization" (few people in the room evidently caught the reference to John Paul II). "We have no right to ask anyone else to do anything the way we would do it," she announced.

This was a bit of a hoot, since the substance and tenor of her remarks rarely deviated from her outrage over the pope's refusal to do things the way she thinks they should be done. Gordon also warned the audience that the growth area in religion was not among the broadminded, compassionate New Yorkers gathered in the room. Increasingly, religious people were "fundamentalists," true believers whose faith was rooted in "hatred and terror and uncertainty." Postmodern people of faith, like Gordon and her admiring listeners, have access to a sense of humility that fundamentalists and so-called Catholic triumphalists explicitly renounce. "Humility, " she said, "that is the virtue most called for in a pluralistic world."

That was rich indeed. Gordon was oblivious to the absence of humility and the unwarranted certainty with which she caricatured the pope's actions as well as the beliefs of those she deems "fundamentalists." Her barely contained anger at the pope prevents her from seeing what James Carroll honestly acknowledges: for all his failings, John Paul II sincerely reveres Judaism and has taken once unimaginable steps toward Jewish-Catholic reconciliation. None of that is good enough for Gordon or her fans.

Lest we forget, all of this was said at the Interfaith Center of New York. What might the center's next program be, "Mormonism: A Weird Religion for Weird People" or "The Hasidim: Haven't They Heard of Birth Control?" □

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JO McGOWAN

Corporal punishment

Natural & other disasters in India

Just minutes before the January 26 earthquake hit Gujarat, India—we live in Dehra Doon, north and east of that state—I was thinking about earthquakes. I had read a novel earlier that week in which one of the characters explained how she always made a point of sending her children off in the morning with a loving good-bye because you just never knew what might happen in the course of the day. She had been deeply affected by an account of a school in Italy that had collapsed in an earthquake, killing every single student inside. She could never shake the image of the parents who must have sent their babies off that morning as if it had been any other day.

On January 26, my son had slipped out of the house while I was busy making my daughter's lunch and I didn't say good-bye to him. It was half an hour before I realized it and the story from the novel came back to me immediately. "What if there were an earthquake?" I thought. An hour later, the bulletins from Gujerat flashed across the nation. One of the most poignant stories involved a class of thirty high-school juniors (my son's age) who had been called in for a special exam (January 26 is a national holiday in India, and children generally attend school only to participate in outdoor parades and patriotic displays); their building collapsed and all but four died.

My husband Ravi is one of India's experts on disaster relief and earthquake-safe housing. Within hours of the tragedy our living room had become a kind of command center. He was on the phone to friends in the United States to mobilize funds, speaking to the prime minister's office to determine the areas of greatest need, receiving reports from friends in the affected villages and towns, and meeting with his team to plan strategies for temporary shelters as well as long-term reconstruction and relief.

Until very recently, we had no television in our home. We finally gave in to the children's pleas only a few months ago. So the experience of having blow-by-blow, minute-to-minute accounts of such a nightmarish tragedy was quite new to me. By midafternoon on the second day I could no longer take it, but Ravi, desperate for more information, couldn't bear to turn it off. Just to clear my head a little, I went out for a walk.

A crowd had gathered at the police station which is at the top of our road. I approached nervously (a crowd outside a police station is never a good sign), but what I saw there was worse than anything I could have imagined. Indeed, it took me over a minute of staring to register what I was seeing, and even now I have difficulty believing I saw it.

A man was being tortured. He had been tied in the "chicken" position (knees to his head) and then hung upside down on a pole stretched across two chairs. His bare legs and arms were a mass of angry red welts and his entire body was trembling violently. Aghast, I asked someone in the crowd what was happening and he told me that the police were trying to get a confession about a recent string of robberies.

Knowing that my Hindi would never rise to this occasion, to say nothing of needing more courage than I possessed alone, I ran home to get Ravi and we dashed back in our car. By the time we returned, the man had been untied and now lay quivering on the ground. As we walked past him and into the station, he stared at us dully, clearly in shock.

The chief policeman was gracious. He had no choice, he assured us. The man was a known criminal and by "interrogating" him for two days, he had already recovered a huge collection of keys and several stolen items (he gestured across the room toward a stack of VCRs, cassette players, and TVs). But he knew there was much more and he was determined to get it back. It was his duty.

Ravi spoke with him at length about the difference between interrogation and torture, and reminded him of the Supreme Court decision against the use of excessive force in extracting confessions. Ravi warned him that he would be inviting his own punishment if he continued to violate the law so flagrantly.

We left finally, knowing that our response had been inadequate and perhaps futile. As we were pulling out of the driveway, the chief walked toward the car and motioned to us to wait. He put his head inside the window and said, "Should I do it inside the station then?"

Ravi looked at him for a long moment, speechless. Then he reached out and took his hand. "Wherever you do it, brother, the upper-wallah (God) will be watching. Think of your own humanity. Do you want to do this to yourself?"

That evening, as still more heartbreaking images of infant corpses and grieving fathers were shown on television, I could think only of that man—a thief perhaps, but also somebody's precious child—beaten senseless by another human being and I wondered if there was any hope for us at all. It is as if acts of God are not enough—we have to create our own tragedies as well. And then I remembered that God hung between two thieves and said that yes, we were worth saving.

But here today—caught between the devastation in Gujerat and the police station in Dehra Doon—I can only say like Peter: "Lord I believe. Help thou my unbelief." □

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Robert Murray Davis

REPORT FROM ROMANIA

Ceauşescu's legacies

Eleven years after the end of Communist rule, Romanians still try to fill the gaps and resolve the contradictions created during four decades of repression and isolation from the West. And sometimes, as in last December's election to the presidency of former Communist Ion Iliescu, who served from 1990 to 1996 as the country's first president after the fall of Nicolae Ceauşescu, they make progress by going backward. In a runoff with Corneliu Vadim Tudor, Iliescu received over 66 percent of the vote, much of it from moderates whose candidates failed to make the second round of voting. Tudor, head of the Greater Romania Party and fierce opponent of Jews, Hungarians, and gypsies, then asked Romania's highest court to set aside the vote on grounds of fraud, bribery, collusion, and a number of other allegations. The court quickly rejected Tudor's appeal only three days after votes were cast.

Aside from electing a former Communist to lead a country into capitalist democracy, the most obvious contradictions in Romania, as in every post-Communist country, are evident on the drive into Bucharest from the airport. Glitzy signs for Western consumer products only partly mask Communist gray.

Much of the gray is literal. What seems on landing to be a golden ground haze turns out to be smog that rises higher and grows thicker toward the center of the city. By day, the grime visibly coats the buildings and dusts the cars (mostly Dacias, locally assembled) that crowd streets and clutter sidewalks. By night, the haze, not quite as thick as that in *Blade Runner*, softens signs and street lights, making the vendors' stalls and the cobbled side streets of the Old Court district look like the Left Bank in Paris.

Bucharest was, by older accounts, a lot more like Paris before various disasters: earthquakes in 1940 and 1977, the bombing of World War II, and the megalomania of Ceauşescu, who, like Nero, wanted to demolish large sections of his capital in order to build a monument to himself.

What is left are nineteenth-century neoclassical government and commercial buildings, domed at the corners and chastely ornamented; Romanian Orthodox churches, the older ones aged into individuality and distinction; mansions of the nobility and higher bourgeoisie turned by the Communists into museums, writers' clubs, and other cultural sites. From these, one can see what early twentieth-century Bucharest must have been like.

Today there are literal gaps in the city, especially in the south center, where the market was cleared and remains empty and boarded up. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of other buildings fell to Ceauşescu's wrecking ball, their sites open wounds. Bucharesters especially mourn the lost churches, and the more superstitious feel that their destruction released forces even more malign than Stalinism and what they called Ceauşism.

Given Romanian attitudes toward what Ceauşescu managed to build before his fall, they should be more tolerant of the ruins. They shrug at the Exposition Center to the north and sneer at the National Theater at the center, but they seem compelled by a perverse form of pride to first take visitors to see the enormous House of the People, second largest building in the world after the Pentagon.

By American standards, the buildings aren't bad—or at any rate are no worse than most of our municipal architecture. People in former Communist countries tend to blame party ideology for what is merely official bad taste. For the Exposition Center, the builders dug a large circular hole and put a dome over it, but the symmetry is much more pleasing than the Stalinist block nearby. The National Theater, a cube slightly rounded at the edges, would grace, or anyway not disgrace, a good-sized American city. It may not harmonize with the classical buildings to the north of University Square, but compared to the dark glass rectangle of the Intercontinental Hotel just to the southwest, it looks restrained, even elegant.

The House of the People could be worse. Like the Pentagon, it doesn't look *that* big because it's a lot broader than it is tall and because, from the front, its full dimensions are not observable. True—and again like the Pentagon—it has no features that would tempt one to take a closer look. But the Romanians will insist that every visitor see it, so prepare to be appalled.

Gaps and attempts to fill them are not confined to Bucharest. In Transylvania, churches built in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries by Saxon settlers are largely deserted or turned into monuments because Ceauşescu allowed the parishioners, still largely German-speaking after more than eight centuries in the region, to emigrate when the German government paid large exit fees. Those that remain are regarded with less suspicion by ethnic Romanians than the much larger Hungarian minority. In Cluj (Klausenberg under the

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Austrians, Koloszvár under the Hungarians, to give an indication of the complexities involved), the mayor removed the part of the plaque identifying King Matthias Corvinus as a Hungarian king and has excavated large holes in front of the statue, apparently to demonstrate what no one disputes: Cluj was a Roman settlement.

And this leaves out of the account the Jews, who suffered under the Iron Guard in the 1930s and even worse under the Nazis during the war. Or mention of the Rom, or gypsies, who are, sooner or later, mentioned by everyone. Ethnocentric racism, as Tudor's popularity attests, is a real problem.

Romanians have tried to bridge cultural and social as well as ethnic gaps. Communist attempts to industrialize a predominantly agricultural people brought to the cities a number of those who found difficult the transition to urban life. Even the casual visitor to Bucharest will see far more evidence of peasant ways than in Central European capitals: wagons drawn by horses, women in rural dress (not colorful peasant costume) sweeping sidewalks with brooms made from twigs, trash carts rumbling down sidewalks on two iron wheels past store windows displaying luxury goods from the West. Off the main streets, one can see women teetering on spike heels across cobblestones, a symptom of Romania's struggle to accommodate new and old.

The new seems to have the edge. During the 1980s, Romanians were quarantined to prevent toxic Western influence. They were and are hungry for cultural fare more substantial than Big Macs—though they clearly want those too. Theaters and cabarets mount avant-garde works that combine lyrical reading with intricate choreography, for example, the use of shopping carts, that would have delighted Busby Berkeley.

Romanians I spoke with have not had enough time to become disenchanted with the West. At a symposium on postmodernism, held in a seventeenth-century building in a district established by Vlad Tepeş (the model for Dracula), a Central European participant observed that discussion always seemed to come back to America as a reference point. The only (mildly) anti-American sentiments were expressed by a performance artist from San Diego.

Romanians are even more enthusiastic about the American political system, though they express wonder and dismay at the confusion about our recent election. As I was leaving Bucharest in November, the passport control officer sympathized with our confusion. To him, "America means democracy." I replied that, in fact, most Americans weren't worried, and in any case, it was better to wait three weeks or even more to get the results than to know them in advance. He did a quick take and agreed. Little did I know that Romanians would soon face their own disputed election. Happily, they had only three days to wait for the result to be finalized. □

Robert Murray Davis *has written extensively on Central and Eastern European literature.*

Harry J. Byrne

SCHOOL CHOICE

Has the Supreme Court changed its mind?

Choice has become a key word in public opinion, politics, and the nation's jurisprudence. But parents have been limited by their economic status in choosing the kind of education they want for their children. The affluent can afford the high tuition for private schools and the more moderate tuition for parochial schools. Low-income families are constrained to accept the public education system with its state-mandated system of values. The situation is different in all of Western Europe and Canada, where substantial government subsidies ensure the freedom of parents to choose a religious school. In our nation, the U.S. Supreme Court has long been challenged to strike a balance between the religion clauses of our First Amendment—"Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." Can unemployment benefits be denied a Seventh Day Adventist discharged for refusing to work on Saturdays? Can crèches and menorahs be placed on government property? Can a prayer be offered before public school graduations or football games? What secular benefits may government provide to students in parochial schools? It is in this latter area that the Supreme Court has been frequently challenged to decide whether a practice constitutes "an establishment of religion" or its appropriate "free exercise."

The jurisprudence of our nation's high court has developed with many twists and turns from a twofold bedrock principle it established in 1947 in upholding state-provided bus transportation to children attending parochial schools: "No government can pass laws which aid one religion or all religions" and "State benefits provided to all citizens without regard to religion are constitutional." As state and local governments attempted to provide secular benefits in fairness to parents of children attending parochial schools, extreme church-state "separationists" were quick to lodge court challenges. Providing secular textbooks was approved by the Supreme Court; payments for school maintenance and for the salaries of teachers of secular subjects were struck down. Building on its 1947 decision and other precedents, the Court in 1971 (*Lemon* v. *Kurtzman*) established a threefold test for the constitutionali-

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ty of public funding of religious institutions: Such monies must serve "a secular legislative purpose," have "a primary effect that neither advances nor inhibits religion," and entail "no excessive government entanglement with religion."

In 1975 (*Meek* v. *Pittenger*) and again in 1977 (*Wolman* v. *Walter*) the Court established a further principle: "books for kids in religious schools, yes; tape recorders and projectors, no." The secular nature of a book could be readily determined and thus permitted, but equipment could be diverted to religious use and thus was prohibited. A plethora of decisions followed, striking down aid programs that did not lend themselves to this easy application. An absolutizing of the establishment clause at the expense of the free-exercise clause seems to have occurred. It was as if the Court treated religion like potential cyanide in the public water supply. In dissenting from a 1985 decision (*Aguilar* v. *Felton*), Chief Justice Warren E. Burger wrote that the Court manifested "hostility toward religion and the children who attend church-sponsored schools." Similar sentiments have been expressed by justices in other cases.

In the 1985 *Aguilar* decision, Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, also writing in dissent, questioned "the utility of entanglement as a separate establishment standard in most cases." In the same case, Justice William H. Rehnquist referred to "entanglement" as a Catch-22 paradox since "aid must be supervised to ensure no entanglement but the supervision itself is held to cause an entanglement." In its tortuous efforts to distinguish between "forbidden religious aid and lawful secular benefit," the Court's evolving incoherence and uncertainty came to be recognized by its own members. Much-needed clarification and fairness were on the way. The *Aguilar* decision, which excluded public school teachers working in federally funded remedial programs from parochial school buildings, on the grounds of political divisiveness and "entanglement," had intolerable consequences. Millions of dollars were diverted from the educational aspects of the program to lease classroom vans placed outside the schools and to provide for bus drivers, maintenance, and heating. Other social and legal complications surfaced. In 1997 in *Agostini* v. *Felton*, the Court overturned this troublesome precedent, declaring: "We therefore conclude that our establishment clause law has significantly changed."

Last June the Court took another major step (*Mitchell* v. *Helms*) in making its church-state jurisprudence more coherent, its principles more unambiguous and equitable. It also seemed to dispel, at least among the Court's majority, any spirit of hostility toward religion and children in religious schools. The Court faced the question: Is a computer like a book and thus a "lawful benefit" or is it equipment and accordingly "forbidden aid"? In its 6-3 decision, the Court declared a computer was like a book. But the Court went much further. It overturned in their entirety its previous bans on instructional equipment (*Meek* v. *Pittenger*, 1975; and *Wolman* v. *Walter*, 1977), stating that mere potential divertibility to religious use was no longer an invalidating factor. No longer, it appears, will previous barriers to aid—the danger of political divisiveness, an undue proportion of aid going to Catholic schools, or a school's "pervasively sectarian" nature—taint the constitutionality of an aid program. Still, in December, Cleveland's voucher program was judged unconstitutional by the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit. In a divided decision, the court ruled that state aid could not be neutral if it went predominantly to religious schools. The case is likely to be taken up by the Supreme Court, so some final clarity on this question may be imminent.

In *Mitchell*, the "computer" case, the Court relied heavily on its 1997 *Agostini* ruling and on two other decisions involving challenges to benefits with religious overtones. In 1986 (*Witters* v. *Washington Department of Services to the Blind*), the Court upheld state financial aid to a blind ministry student, pointing out that the aid had been directed to the Christian college, not by any choice of government, but by the private choice of the recipient. It was, the Court said, as though an individual had received a paycheck and turned a portion of it over to a religious institution. In 1993 (*Zobrest* v. *Catalina School District*), the Court upheld Arizona's provision of a sign-language interpreter to a deaf student who chose to bring her to his Catholic high school. Again, the key to constitutional legitimacy was the private choice of the individual.

Writing for a plurality in the *Helms* computer case, Justice Clarence Thomas, joined by Chief Justice Rehnquist and Justices Anthony M. Kennedy and Antonin Scalia, made specific reference to past bigotry against Catholics resulting in Court decisions banning aid to students in schools that were "pervasively sectarian"—code language for "Catholic." That barrier is now gone. The four justices were joined in a separate concurring opinion by Justices O'Connor and Stephen Breyer that, overruling past barriers, nevertheless enunciated some remaining restrictions. It requires that the aid be merely supplementary and not relieve the school of expenses it would otherwise incur, that the aid be to the child, not to the school, and that "any aid...that ultimately flows to a religious institution does so only as a result of the genuinely independent and private choices of the aid recipients." The important role of private choice is thus affirmed. O'Connor's concurring opinion is refreshing for this affirmation and also for its rejection as an "absurdity," in the dissent of Justices David H. Souter, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, and John Paul Stevens, their opposition to giving library books as a benefit. Souter and Ginsburg had argued that a religious school could assign such a book for a religious critique! O'Connor dryly noted, "Even a publicly financed lunch would apparently be unconstitutional under a divertibility rationale because religious school officials conceivably could use the lunch to lead students in a blessing over the bread."

Although there is no specific case dealing with public aid to religious schools on this year's Supreme Court docket, the future may bring more long-overdue relief to parents who choose religious schools for their children. □

Monsignor Harry J. Byrne *is a priest of the Archdiocese of New York.*

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THE FILMS OF ROBERT BRESSON

The Mozart of French cinema

Joseph Cunneen

The December 1999 death of Robert Bresson at the age of ninety-two represents the virtual end of the post-World War II era of internationally known film directors. Although Bresson never found the broad audience that made Ingmar Bergman and Federico Fellini household names, his reputation among movie professionals—Jean-Luc Godard called him "the Mozart of French cinema"—guarantees that his work will continue to be studied, especially by aspiring directors. And Bresson's axiom that "the supernatural is only the real brought close up" suggests an additional reason to arrange retrospectives of his films and look at them more closely.

The relationship between movies and religion can be a treacherous one, often exploited by well-intentioned pastors looking to illustrate their sermons or teachers of religious studies, hoping to increase class enrollment. Bresson's work doesn't lend itself to such purposes. He is as little interested in conveying pious messages as in replicating surface realism; he wants the viewer to discover the interior meaning of the images he has arranged. He is known in the United States as the director of *Diary of a Country Priest* (1950). An examination of Bresson's stylistic decisions shows how he transformed Georges Bernanos's classic but apparently unfilmable novel into a credible and deeply affecting movie.

Despite the critical success of his first two films, *The Angels of Sin* (1943) and *The Ladies of the Bois de Boulogne* (1944), Bresson decided to break with the conventions of French film production in preparing *Diary* for the screen. He chose unknown actors, with little or no experience. Instead of using artificial sets, he shot the movie in a village in the Pas-de-Calais, and he avoided all spectacle and melodrama. Claude Laydu became so identified with the role as the young curé d'Ambricourt that he virtually disappeared from movies afterward. Disciplined by Bresson almost to the point of playing an automaton, Laydu said he did not realize that he had been portraying a saint until he saw the completed film.

Bresson is faithful to the Bernanos text—all the dialogue in the movie is taken from the novel—but the director's style is quite different. While Bernanos is often lyrical, highly visual, and dramatic, the film opens simply, showing the school notebook in which the curé is making an entry. We hear his voice as he rereads it: "I don't think I am doing wrong in jotting down, day by day, with absolute frankness, the very simple trivial secrets of a very ordinary kind of life." Throughout the film, the curé's voice either echoes the text as he makes his diary entries, or prolongs it in subsequent images. While it would seem redundant to repeat what the images already reveal, such doubling assures an intensification; there is a constant going and coming between the external and the internal world.

Sometimes the voice pronouncing the words of the journal covers over those being spoken by the curé, who is heard again only when the journal's voice has become silent. This occurs in the film's key scene, when the curé challenges the local countess on her long-stored sense of personal bitterness. "Have you heard me?" she demands. He says no, and we haven't either, because for a moment the voice of the journal is the only one that is audible. On such occasions, leaving ordinary duration for a domain beyond time, we enter the realm of inner consciousness.

The supreme instance of this technique is an exchange between the young curé and his mentor, the curé de Torcy, when the older man insists that we all have to find the place in the gospel where we personally encounter Jesus. Suddenly Torcy exclaims: "What on earth's the matter? What

No 'Great Escape'

Joseph Cunneen, *founder and long-time editor of* Cross Currents, *is movie reviewer for the* National Catholic Reporter.

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are you blubbering about?" There is a close-up of the young priest's face as Torcy's words are covered by the voice of the journal: "I hadn't realized that I was weeping." A tear rolls down the young curé's cheek as the voice continues: "The truth is that my place for all time has been the Garden of Olives." After a medium shot of the two priests, Torcy continues: "What's up now? You're not even listening to me; are you dreaming?" Again the interior voice: "Suddenly our Lord had granted me the grace of letting me know, through the words of my old teacher...that I was the prisoner of his sacred Passion." Bresson makes these words more poignant by avoiding any dramatic emphasis; we hear the barking of a dog, and the camera's gradual withdrawal returns us to the world of appearances.

Diary of a Country Priest is a prime example of Bresson's rigor; he eliminated almost a third of the finished film in a final cut for the exhibitors' copy. There is an absence of psychology, which French films had prided themselves on, and practically no character development; each scene is complete in itself, as if controlled by some law of necessity. Bresson's love of abstraction is accompanied by a sure instinct for the telling concrete detail. When the curé falls in the mud, Seraphita, his precocious catechism student, gives him a cloth to wipe his face; during the conversation with the countess, we hear the raking of paths in the park; and visuals of doors and grills underline the relationship between people and things. Bresson makes it easy for agnostics to explain the actions of the curé as the result of heredity and morbidity, and the pious may feel cheated by the director's refusal to edify. His very restraint, however, forces viewers to give *Diary* their closest attention. Film critic and theorist André Bazin's praise is well earned: "Probably for the first time, the cinema gives us a film in which the only genuine incidents, the only perceptible movements, are those of the life of the spirit. It also offers us a new dramatic form that is specifically religious—or better still, specifically theological; a phenomenology of salvation and grace."

Bresson's cinema was a reaction to the artificiality of most movie-generated emotion, which he saw as an exploitation of ready-made feelings.

A Man Escaped (1956), Bresson's next movie (the French title is *A Man Condemned to Death Escaped*), is an even clearer demonstration that the "spiritual" aspect of his work emerges from style rather than subject matter. When I took my then-fifteen-year-old son to see the film, he was hardly interested in the religious subtext but found the movie far more "real" than the thrillers to which he was accustomed. Although the story is based on the real-life escape of André Devigny (renamed Fontaine in the movie) from the Nazi prison of Montluc in Lyon in 1943, Bresson's intentions were very different from those of the Italian neorealists. "I wanted all the factual details to be exact," he said, "but at the same time I tried to get beyond basic realism...I was hoping to make a film about objects which would at the same time have a soul. That is to say, to reach the latter through the former."

Bresson tells us nothing of the prisoner's activities in the French Resistance, but shots of his face show intelligence, determination, and self-control. The camera observes his hands intently as they patiently scrape away the joints of his cell door, using an iron spoon he has bent into a chisel. The movie's title seems to eliminate suspense, but by concentrating on the details of prison life and avoiding melodramatic effects, Bresson brings us close to Devigny's actual experience and encourages us to reflect on the significance of imprisonment and liberation.

A Man Escaped is made up of innumerable, quick-moving fragments; there are 600 shots but no extended sequences. "It was a matter," Bresson said, "of making a rapid film with slow things, suggesting the heavy life of prison." With Fontaine's running commentary as the spinal cord of its construction, most of the film is presented in the first person. The voice is not superimposed on the dialogue, as in *Diary*; we are witnesses, not confidants. Paradoxically, by presenting events with cool detachment even during moments of great danger, audience involvement becomes more and more intense.

Fontaine's story shows a development from solitude to communication. A prisoner in the courtyard shows him how he can communicate with those outside the walls; another, Orsini, after an unsuccessful attempt to escape, informs him that hooks will be necessary in descending the prison walls and that the lamp frame in his cell contains three hooks. When the men shuffle into the courtyard to empty their slop buckets, there are notes from Mozart's Mass in C Minor, and an imprisoned Protestant pastor hands Fontaine a note. It contains the passage from John's Gospel in which Jesus speaks of the need to be born again, including the words of the movie's subtitle: "The spirit blows where it wills."

Bresson's pacing is deliberate. We see Fontaine fashioning cords from the iron wires of his bedstead and the cloth of his bolster; when a package arrives, he transforms its contents into additional cords needed for climbing down the prison walls. Just as Fontaine determines to act, the guards bring in Jost, a young man dressed partly in a German uniform, to share the cell. Despite his fear that the soldier may be a spy,

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Fontaine takes a risk and involves Jost in his planned escape.

Just as they are in *Diary*, almost all the sounds in *A Man Escaped* are natural. The slamming of a cell door, the gunfire when Orsini is executed, the whistle of a train passing close to the prison are real sounds, experienced by the audience as if they too were prisoners. When, during the actual escape, Fontaine overpowers a guard, Bresson deliberately keeps the violence out of view, forcing us to both shrink from and accept the costs of the struggle for freedom.

Religion was never imposed on the material; offered a tiny (four-millimeter) cross for the pastor to wear, Bresson told his prop director, "I'm afraid that might be a little big." Nor was he making a thriller; surface excitement is deliberately hushed, allowing reflection on the ways of providence. As an old prisoner who was close to despair tells Fontaine, "It was necessary for Orsini to fail so you could succeed." At the end, when Fontaine jumps to safety from the outer wall, the "Kyrie" of Mozart's Mass reverberates in thanksgiving, but also continues to intercede for all who remain within the walls, whether prisoners or jailers. Paradoxically, a sense of community has been achieved through one man's courageous actions.

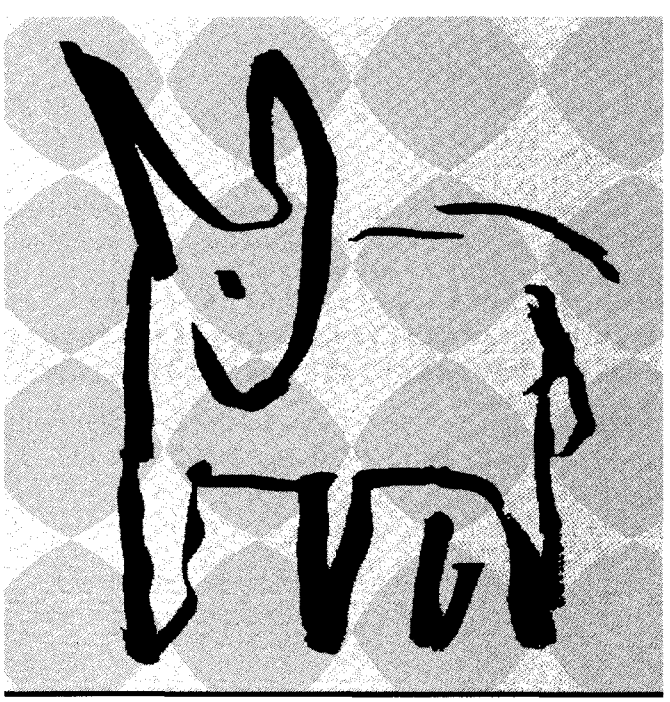
Bresson's choice of material for many of his movies indicates a strong religious sensibility. *The Trial of Joan of Arc* (1962) incorporates the actual transcript of Joan's trial, and Bernanos is again the source for *Mouchette* (1967). Dostoyevsky was Bresson's favorite author; he transposes *A Gentle Woman* (1969) and *Four Nights of a Dreamer* (1971) from Saint Petersburg to Paris, and borrows several threads from *Crime and Punishment* in *Pickpocket* (1959). *L'Argent* (1983) is based on a short story by Tolstoy. Bresson conveys his vision of reality through a rigorous film style. Susan Sontag helpfully suggests a parallel with Brecht's theater: techniques that seem to distance us from the action end up by making our experience more absorbing. Bresson's cinema was a reaction to the artificiality of most movie-generated emotion, which he saw as an exploitation of ready-made feelings. His book-length essay, *Notes on Cinematography* (1975) was a complete rejection of what he calls "photographed theatre." Instead of "performing," Bresson asked his actors—whom he called "models"—to read the text, repeating movements and phrases until a kind of automatism was reached, revealing their inner being. "It's marvelous," he said, "to discover a man gradually and to the degree that one gets deeper into a film, instead of knowing in advance what he will be. In that case, he would be nothing but the personality of an actor. In a true film, we should have the feeling of discovering someone."

Harder to summarize is Bresson's narrative method. Fragments are constantly used to suggest the whole, and there are ellipsis, fast-cutting, and little psychological explanation of character. This is especially evident in *Pickpocket*, which was received as a near revelation by the young directors of what became known as the "*nouvelle vague*." In preparation for the movie, Bresson frequented police headquarters and informed himself on how pickpockets operate. The images we remember best from the film are those of the hands of a group of thieves working their trade in front of the Gare de Lyon. At the outset, there is a brief text: "This is not a crime story." It concludes, "This adventure will reunite two souls who otherwise would not have known each other." Narrative development, punctuated by the seventeenth-century music of Lulli, is abrupt and unexplained. As in *Diary* and *A Man Escaped*, the central character narrates the story that takes place before our eyes. There are abrupt passages of time and new characters are introduced without preparation, but the sudden ending, in which the imprisoned Michel extends his hands through the bars to Jeanne, seems somehow inevitable. Bresson has interiorized what others would have treated as a naturalistic documentary.

The central figure of *Au hasard, Balthasar* (1966), the most personal and perhaps the most powerful of Bresson's films, is a donkey. Bresson, of course, is counting on our recognition that the donkey is a powerful symbol of the lowly among whom Jesus chose to live. The movie's title is the motto of the ancient counts of Baux (the presumptive heirs of the Magi); during the credits, accompanied by the andante of Schubert's Piano Sonata no. 20, we hear the braying of a donkey.

Bresson said he wanted "to show that the stages in the life of a donkey are the same as those in the life of a man." In the first scene the newborn donkey is taken home and baptized amid idyllic images of a village childhood. Years pass, and we observe Balthasar's trials at the hands of a succession of masters who whip him mercilessly. He even performs in a circus, where there is an unforgettable exchange

(Continued on page 18)



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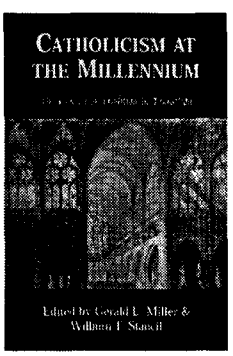

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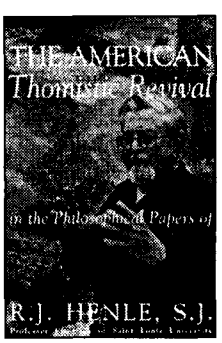

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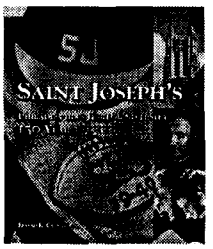

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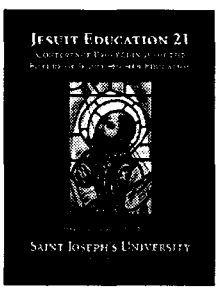

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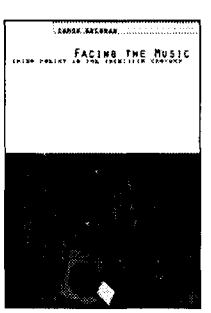

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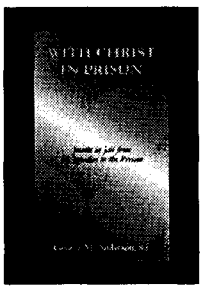

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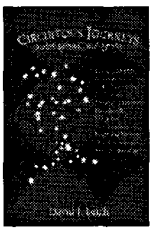

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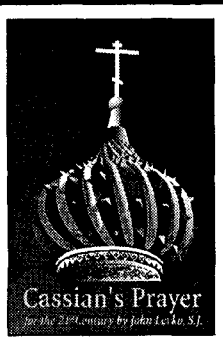

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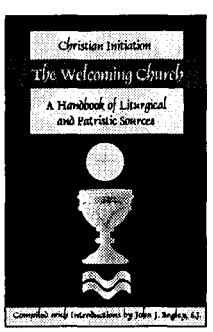

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(Continued from page 15)

of glances between Balthasar and the other animals. Near the end, covered with relics, Balthasar takes part in a religious procession, but that same night he is taken by smugglers to carry contraband to the frontier. Shots send the men fleeing; in the morning we see a bleeding donkey struggling with its burden. Suddenly bells are heard as a flock of sheep surround the beast; when they move off, we see Balthasar extended on the ground, dead.

No summary of the plot can explain why this movie, which shows so much pain and cruelty, is nevertheless not depressing. The bright colors, the wide, panoramic shots of the meadow, the sheep's bells continuing to call out even after Balthasar dies, and a final return of the Schubert sonata create a deeply affecting and healing ending. A French theologian has written that "Everything happens as if the 'holiness' of Balthasar permitted him to bring to completion the aspirations to the good...which exist in the other characters, but which in them do not succeed."

Bresson's final film, *L'Argent* (1983), made when he was seventy-six, displays the confidence of a master ready to explore an even darker reality. An indictment of a money-driven society, the movie is a summation of Bresson's style, in which the accidents of chance and the possibilities of grace are found inextricably connected. Based on Tolstoy's short story, "The False Bank Note," *L'Argent* follows the chain of events after young students pass a counterfeit bill at a photography shop. The shop-owners use it to pay for a package brought by Yvon, a young messenger, who loses his job after he innocently uses the bill to pay for a meal. Desperate, he becomes the driver in a robbery attempt, but is caught and sent to prison. There, learning that his little daughter has died and that his wife is leaving him, he tries to commit suicide. When he is revived, he is intent on vengeance.

L'Argent is a stark reminder that Bresson was primarily concerned with the conflict between sin and grace. He presents Yvon's surrender not as an act of weakness but a way of breaking the chain of evil, perhaps as the beginning of redemption.

Released from prison, he takes a room in a small hotel. In a close-up in the lavatory, water turns red from the blood on his hands: he has murdered the proprietors. Rushing out, he exchanges glances with a grey-haired woman and follows her home; the next sequence is the most tender and terrifying of Bresson's career.

The woman, a widow who takes care of an aged father and an adolescent nephew, closes the kitchen door and tells Yvon to sit down and eat. After he tells her the details of his crime, she calmly assures him of pardon. "If I were God," she says, "I would pardon everyone." Yvon pets the dog; "I know that you won't turn me in," he tells her. There is a moment of near-domesticity as he passes on the clothes she has washed, and she hangs them up. But what follows is pure savagery, though the killings are not shown: the dog groans, dead bodies lie on the stairway, and the widow is seen seated calmly on her bed. "Where is the money?" Yvon cries; drops of blood descend along the wall, followed by the sound of an axe falling into a stream.

Yvon rushes to a café, then to police agents to confess: "It is I who killed the hotelkeeper and his wife in order to steal from them, and I have just assassinated a whole family." In a strangely appropriate final image, the café patrons are massed against the door through which Yvon and the police pass. They represent all of us who remain in the theater and look at the screen.

L'Argent is a stark reminder that Bresson was primarily concerned with the conflict between sin and grace. He presents Yvon's surrender not as an act of weakness but a way of breaking the chain of evil, perhaps as the beginning of redemption. There are reminders of the communion of saints, most notably in the gentle glance of the widow even in the face of horror. Earlier, Yvon's prison cellmate encourages him to resist the temptation to revolt, and another prisoner, looking out at the courtyard, says, "I always pray for suicides." At the prison Mass, while the chaplain recites the first prayers of the canon, interceding for the living and the dead, the prisoners succeed in exchanging various contraband objects despite the surveillance of the guards. At the end of the sequence the celebrant says, "Snatch us from damnation and receive us among your elect."

Nevertheless, the film would be unbearable except for the extreme economy of means employed by Bresson. The first image of *L'Argent* is of an ATM machine that operates twenty-four hours a day. The last is that of an open door through which Yvon, led by the police and gawked at by the curious, passes by in chains, yet perhaps truly free for the first time.

The constant sense of religious mystery in Bresson's films, therefore, is not so much a product of subject matter as of style. Bresson's apparent coldness encourages a state close to contemplation in the audience, though few would formulate their responses in explicitly religious terms. Some may refuse to see in his work anything but human will. (Indeed, he first thought of giving *A Man Escaped* the title *Help Yourself.*) But if we look more closely at his films, grace is there, powerful and invisible. As Amedée Ayfre has said, "In Bresson's universe 'all is grace,' but simultaneously 'all is freedom.'" □

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HALLUCINOGENS FOR ALL

'Chocolat' & 'Traffic'

Lasse Hallström's *Chocolat* takes us to a village in France in 1959, where a mysterious woman named Vianne (Juliette Binoche) shows up with her young daughter and opens a sumptuous *chocolaterie*. Sounds innocent enough, yet soon the village hums with *scandale*. First of all, there's no husband in sight—it's Mademoiselle, not Madame, Vianne pertly corrects the prying mayor, and no, she won't be attending Mass. Meanwhile, customers find themselves strangely smitten by Vianne's sinfully good chocolate. "It melts ever so slowly on your tongue," exclaims one, "and tortures you with pleasure!"

European traditions stress chocolate's origins as an exotic New World import—even today, chocolate ads favor seductive themes—and it's this mythical quality Hallström is after. "What's the decor," quips Vianne's landlady (Judi Dench) in the new shop, "early Mexican brothel?" Indeed, Vianne's sweets contain a secret powder, traceable to South America, where years ago her father married a wild beauty and discovered a Mayan drink that could "unlock hidden yearnings." With this magic ingredient Vianne works an all-purpose salvage operation on the village's citizenry: giving a battered woman the strength to leave her brutish husband, drawing out the artist in a young boy suffering under a rigid mom, and blowing away amorous doldrums right and left.

Chocolat looks back to an earlier era in European novels and films, waxing nostalgic about the stultifying conformity of provincial life. Hallström delights in the moral jolt delivered by an unmarried mother who is not only pretty and defiant, but an atheist to boot, and in the Northern European romance of exotic (read: sexually free) southern lands and gypsy freedoms (represented here by a band of riverboat travelers, led by Johnny Depp). The Catholic church looms as a major joy killer, against which Vianne's regime of sweet seductions poses a kind of liberation chocology: we see the sacramental wafers placed on tongues in church, then cut to chocolate wafers melting on the tongues of her faithful.

In one hilarious scene, the mayor breaks into Vianne's store one night for a wild debauch—this priggish custodian of the public weal, in his tight vest, (played with cartoonish fun by Alfred Molina), waking sprawled in the display window the next morning, smeared with chocolate. Such episodes could have made for a delicious, racy comedy, a romp through the reckless ecstasies, and embarrassments, of sensual delight. Alas, *Chocolat* is too earnest and too tame for that. Hallström wants to charm us, *and* instruct us in the morality of pleasure, *and* uplift us too. A feel-good air of preaching to the converted drenches the film. In one cloying scene, the young village priest chucks his prepared Easter sermon to speak from the heart, exhorting his audience to "measure goodness by what we embrace, what we create, and what we include." In case we missed it, the narrator informs us that "the parishioners felt a new sensation that day—a lightening of the spirit."

Expert in liberation chocology

Hallström's 1985 Swedish-language masterpiece, *My Life as a Dog*, was a luminous study of the joys and sorrows of childhood, and his earliest American films, *Once Around* and the underappreciated *What's Eating Gilbert Grape?*, consolidated his reputation as a director who could aim for the heart without pandering. All three of these films (and his more recent *Cider House Rules*) wisely counter an impulse toward the cute and the sentimental with something gritty or grotesque or absurd, or authentically hurt, and give us characters whose foibles, while endearing (Hallström loves eccentrics), reflect stubbornness or loneliness. *Chocolat* seems impatient with such complexity, eager to get to the sweet and simple core of things.

The move from realism to fable doesn't serve Hallström well. Cuteness runs rampant, leaving us in a fairyland village of wizened widows who flirt with the little old man (the one with a dog on a leash), who confesses his impure thoughts to the babyfaced village priest, and sings Elvis when no one is around. It's all so cute, right down to the little dog in the confessional, that even the statue in the village square can't suppress a magic-realist smile. *Chocolat* offers a quaintly Disneyfied Europe—complete with schoolboys standing on tiptoes, book satchels slung over their shoulders, to peep through Vianne's store window—that may establish Hallström as Europe's Norman Rockwell.

Where Hallström stamps his every film with a signature sensibility, Steven Soderbergh seems to defy notions of consistent directorial style. I would have bet the house that the person behind *sex, lies and videotape* couldn't also have done *King of the Hill*, a warmly heartrending tale of a Depression-era childhood; *Out of Sight*, a sexy Elmore Leonard adaptation with hip Tarantinoesque touches; and *Erin Brockovich*, a sympathetic portrayal of a single working mom. And then there are *Kafka* and *Schizopolis*, which I won't even try to summarize. Soderbergh is that rare crossover director, both art house and A-list.

Traffic, his sprawling saga of the drug wars, boasts the flashy new husband-wife team of Michael Douglas and Catherine Zeta-Jones, with quality ac-

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tors—Dennis Quaid, Amy Irving, Albert Finney—snapping up secondary roles, and William Weld and Orrin Hatch in cameos. (When the politicians clamor for roles, you know you've gotten popular.) Adapted from a 1989 British TV miniseries, the film feels crammed to overflowing. The story weaves three plot strands, and Soderbergh, who did the camerawork himself, uses lighting and filters to lend a different look to each: sunwashed and lazy for L.A., where Zeta-Jones, a spoiled but ruthless trophy wife, copes with her husband's arrest for drug smuggling; austere blue for Washington, where Douglas plays a federal judge nominated as the new drug czar; and a thick tobacco brown, mottled and dangerous, for Mexico, where the exciting, golden-eyed Benicio Del Toro is a cop on the front lines of the drug war.

Keeping it all moving is no mean feat, but Soderbergh's control is superb. In contrast to the moral, political, and intellectual ruin it depicts, *Traffic* itself radiates confidence. Deft touches abound: disturbing images, like a teenage girl's tear of rapture when she freebases cocaine for the first time, and coy ironies, as when we listen to a table of women patter on about the delicious breast of duck served at their country club lunch, then casually pan past ducks on the lawn nearby—the eaters and the eaten. Soderbergh scores some points too easily, like the irony of Beltway mavens talking drug policy at a Georgetown cocktail party over cries of "Scotch and soda, please!" In fact, nothing in the film suggests that alcohol rivals the destructiveness of cocaine, which we see decimating lives in the most garish fashion. *Traffic* doesn't argue that drugs aren't a scourge; merely that we have no idea what to do about them. As the three main dramas develop, lives careen toward disaster and hopelessness surges. "You see the futility of what you're doing, and you do it anyway," a drug dealer berates the cop who arrests him. Enforcement, he points out, merely depresses the fortunes of some kingpins while elevating others: "You work for a drug dealer too." As the would-be drug czar whose naiveté blinds him to his own daughter's addiction, Douglas is systematically harrowed for two-plus hours, then humbly renounces war-on-drugs metaphors ("I don't know how you wage war on your own family") and beats a chastised retreat, family in tow, to Al-Anon.

Traffic left me impressed, but curiously underwhelmed. Despite its panache, its brash look and feel, the stuff of the film seems pretty familiar. Does the Mexican general have to be so luridly corrupt? the drug czar's daughter a full-blown crack and heroin addict at sixteen? Suspended between drama and documentary, *Traffic* dissects vast, systemic problems while struggling to supply dramatic resolutions, and even a few redemptions, for its individual characters. It ends up being a little bit betwixt and between. But no matter. A big movie with a top-drawer cast, an ambitious and talented young director, a socially conscious theme, and plenty of hand wringing for all, *Traffic* may shake its head in despair at America's drug morass, but it sure knows the formula for Oscar. □

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A few centuries ago, most important writers were strictly local heroes. The future pillars of Western art and sensibility were guys (occasionally gals) from the neighborhood who stayed put, at least when they were allowed to. The ultimate ambition of an Aeschylus or a Euripides was to win first prize at the annual theater festival in hometown Athens. Though Dante didn't have to leave Italy during his political exile, this held no comfort for him because the Florence that drove him away was his real homeland, his political base, his world. François Villon didn't identify with his city, Paris, as much as with the neighborhood (Notre Dame and its environs), from which the poet-gallows bird drew his lice-ridden inspirations. The creator of the most wonderful of all British narrative poems, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, doomed himself to anonymity and a readership of scholars by never leaving his country estate in northwest England and by writing in a dialect that didn't become standard English. When Chaucer, the father of English poetry, was praised by a cultured foreigner, the historian Froisart, it was for his diplomacy, not *The Canterbury Tales*. And, of course, Shakespeare's idea of success was good box office in strictly one city, London.

Now let's fast-forward to America between the world wars, the era that exalted the idea of The Great American Novel, and that invested the successful young novelist with the glamour that only movie and pop music stars have nowadays.

From his home in the Midwest or his boarding house in Paris, the young genius has been summoned to New York and a booth in Sardi's by his publisher who is aglow at the first novel's critical reception and initial sales and is bursting to regale the young man with visions of the near future: foreign rights about to be sold, translations to be commissioned, a Broadway adaptation slated for next fall, the Pulitzer committee taking notice, Hollywood studio representatives preparing a generous contract, and...oh, by the way, can you make it to the Algonquin for lunch tomorrow? Dorothy and Bob Benchley are dying to meet you, and I understand GBS is in town...

Accepted. Published. Praised. Prized. And, most of all, *removed*. Physically removed by his improved finances, certainly, but also removed psychologically by his new celebrity. A cynosure cannot enjoy the sort of anonymity that once allowed him to dwell in a neighborhood and observe others surreptitiously while going unobserved himself. A true local hero—the high school football star, the prize-winning economics professor newly come onto campus for a guest lectureship, the mayor who's lured big business to town—gets friendly greetings from passing cars and pats on the back from pedestrians. But the world-famous writer, like the world-famous anyone, is in danger of being mobbed or stalked or killed if he tries to become part of a neighborhood. He or she must dwell apart in the semimythical land of Celebrityhood. And that is a place that knows no real locality at all.

There may always be writers who enjoy that sort of celebrity (J. K. Rowling is the latest) but their numbers will almost certainly decrease as time goes on and the reading of novels is enjoyed by a constantly shrinking audience. But since there will also always be writers who simply need to write out of the sheer hunger to arrange words, explore ideas, and create characters, and since computers now allow such would-be authors the small, neat pleasures of desktop publishing with its clean, professional looking scripts ready for handsome binding, a new, more modest image of the budding writer may someday emerge: not the brash tyro aiming to have Manhattan and, soon, the rest of the world at his feet, but someone who comes close to resembling the writer-as-local-hero of the distant past. Let me give an example of one such author whom I've observed in the flesh and up close.

"Everyone has at least one literary lunch in them."

I enter the Russell Public Library of Middletown, Connecticut, just around the corner from Wesleyan University. Walking past the circulation desk, I turn left and enter a publisher's office.

No, wait, it's not a publisher's office but the library's reference department. But, behold, in one corner, publishing is indeed in progress. Crouched over a computer keyboard is a middle-aged man with a pate appropriately monkish and a face appropriately gnomic, for like any good writer he coaxes his

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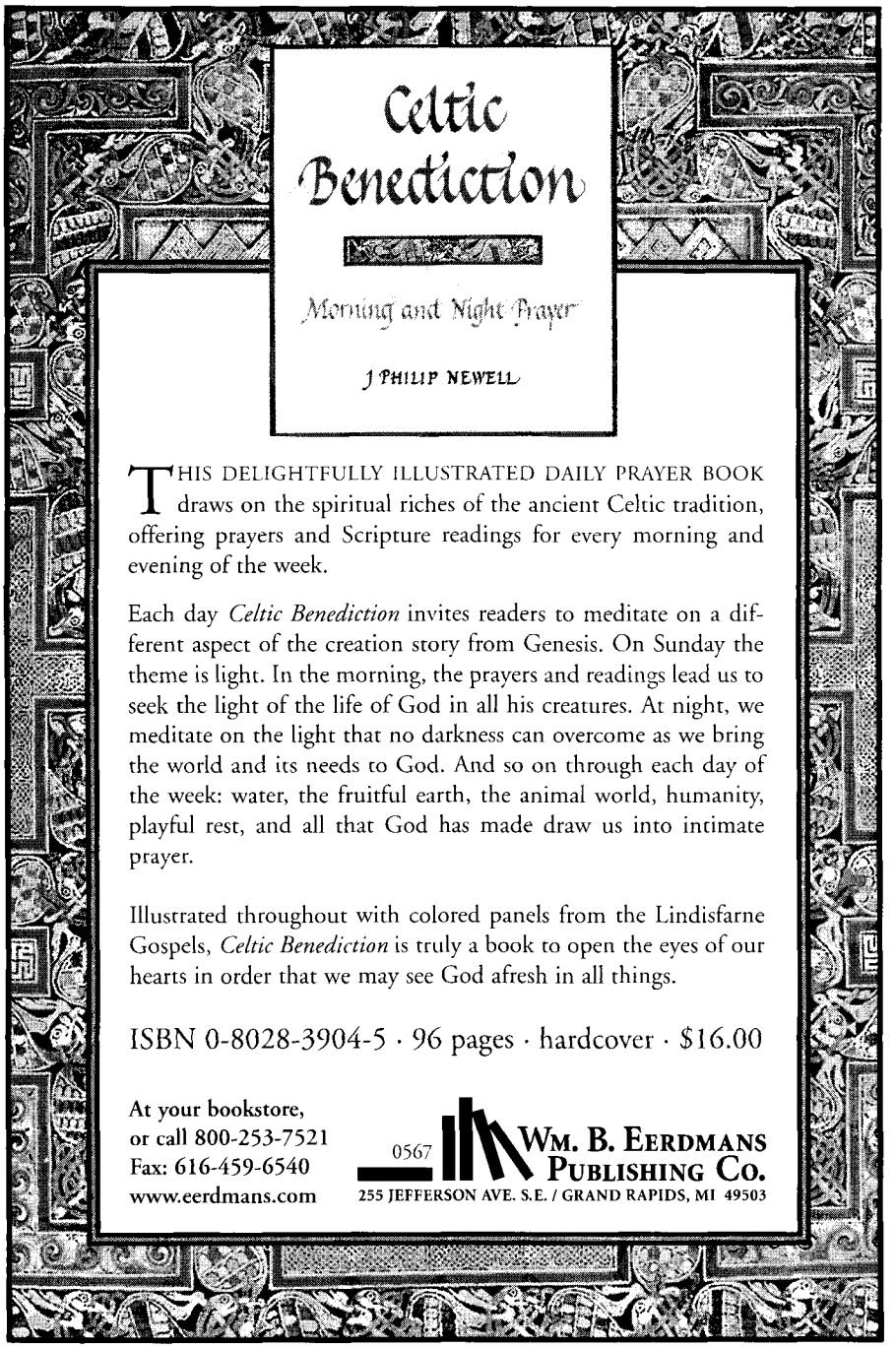
thoughts onto the page with the humble intensity of a monk decorating a manuscript or the greedy intensity of a gnome counting his gold. He has slipped his complete works onto some disks which he carries to and from the library. With the aid of a benevolent library computer technician, he has installed a wide variety of typefonts on the hard drive which not only he but any other library patron can employ (thereby making our writer not only the beneficiary but the benefactor of the library), and once he has written at least a couple of drafts in longhand, he chooses the most appropriate font for the story or essay in progress, types it, revises again and again until satisfied, prints, photocopies, turns the results over to a bindery, and winds up with the latest of several handsome booklets with blue or purple or red covers, puckishly decorated by their author. Presto, a twenty-first-century descendant of the Elizabethan chapbook.

The contents? Modern variations of Greek and Indian myths, "cynical" (but actually quite poignant) Christmas stories, short fiction about Americans in Paris in the 1960s, factual reports on scientific conferences, ruminations on the state of current academia, horror stories of the homeless, book reviews, farces, musings on the latest developments in physics, and one of the most unsparing and tacitly poignant autobiographies I have ever read.

Whose autobiography? That of Roy Lisker, onetime math prodigy, ex-wandering musician, contributor to Jean-Paul Sartre's *Les Temps Modernes*, and local character in a succession of places (mostly university communities), political protestor and prankster, and indefatigable self-publisher.

Unless you are Noam Chomsky or historian Howard Zinn or composers Milton Babbitt and John Harbison or one of the other subscribers to Lisker's monthly publication, *Ferment* (rlisker@yahoo.com), you will have to take my word for it that Roy is worth reading for the way he can make a fictional character as rooted in the real world as the subject of a *New Yorker* profile, while endowing a real-life academic with the fabulousness of a character in Dickens. If there were any literary justice in the world, Lisker's story, "Sam, The *Messiah* Man," about a violinist who devotes his entire career to perfecting the violin passages of a Handel oratorio, would be as renowned as Borges's fable about another artistic specialist, "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote." But what really concerns me here is to point out how tenaciously Lisker reverts to the seemingly outmoded notion of the writer as local character and streetcorner vendor of news, satire, and fantasy. To be sure, Lisker has been conventionally published (his academic satire, *Getting That Meal Ticket*, was published in Paris by René Juliard in 1972), but he now confines his energies to using his private printing press in the Russell Library, hawking his wares on the Wesleyan campus, giving readings at local bookstores, and mailing his publications to subscribers who are all over the country because Roy, in his youth, had been all over the country befriending and bugging people while enacting his role of academic-mathematician-wandering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minstrel. It's as if Lisker had spent his youth creating a corridor of readership for himself and now spends his maturity feeding that readership while never budging from his tightly confined purlieus. The neighborhood of Notre Dame had its Villon; the neighborhood of Wesleyan has its Lisker.

Is he satisfied? Of course not. All writers want the world at their feet. But at least he is scrupulously working and reworking his own oeuvre, regardless of what posterity will make of it. And, whereas a shrewd publisher would try to get an "angle" on Lisker, try to zero in on that aspect of his work that could be commodified and slickly publicized (Kerouac without a car? *Travels with Charley* without the dog?), Lisker is free on his own to mine the multifariousness of his life to produce the multifariousness of his work: science vs. humanities, performing art vs. creative art, political activism vs. the life of study. Right now he's studying the works of Quintilian, the great first-century rhetorician. Any chance that Quintilian will be a hot topic in New York publishing offices soon? Roy needn't worry about that as he draws upon the ancient master for his next story or essay. His tiny, devoted readership will go along with his latest forays as long as he gives them something lively to read.

In short, Roy Lisker is writing American samizdat. The comparison might strike some as insulting to the brave Russian writers who secretly created a literature in the Soviet Union that might, and in some cases did, earn them years in prison. After all, what kind of samizdat is it when the author can use the country's mail service to deliver it, and when the mayor occasionally shows up to hear the author recite it?

But Lisker is an American writer living the twenty-first-century American literary situation and, while he certainly doesn't risk death, he does risk, by not tailoring his writing to the exigencies of mainstream publishing, the American version of Siberia for writers: complete indifference, isolation, ineffectuality, and a one-way ticket to solipsism. That he has persisted with his cranky, occasionally brilliant, and always communicative work seems to me, in a lesser way, heroic enough to be called samizdat.

How many other writers in the future will be doing similar work? As I was completing this essay, I heard of the merger of AOL and Time Warner, the biggest in a series of media mergers over the last decade. Does anybody seriously think that such corporate Goliaths, though their minions blather on about the explosion of creativity they are going to unleash, will really encourage true idiosyncrasy (as opposed to "cutting edge" trendiness), corrosive wit, oddball brilliance, or even just plain civilized writing? It seems to me that in the era of the bottom line, when even the products of university presses are beginning to look a little too much alike, a few writers may want to swerve away from all straight lines, whether at the top or the bottom, turn their computers into printing presses, and hit the streets with a few chapbooks for sale. François Villon would sympathize and might even steal a copy or two. □

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Eyewitnesses to history

Our Vietnam
The War, 1954–1975
A.J. Langguth
Simon & Schuster, $35, 766 pp.

Chris Appy

Michael Herr's justly celebrated book of war reportage, *Dispatches*, ends with the words: "Vietnam Vietnam Vietnam, we've all been there." It is one of those enigmatic lines you might admire until some teacher requires a three-page interpretation. In truth, only a small fraction of Americans had literally been to Vietnam and most of them were GIs who might as well have been on another planet for all they were told, or allowed to experience, of that foreign culture. Some had to "hump the boonies" out in "Indian Country," slogging with heavy packs from one grid coordinate to another in search of vaguely defined enemies before returning, if they were lucky, to a nation they had begun to call "The World." Others were stationed on large, fenced-in bases that imported so much asphalt, refrigeration, and rock 'n' roll they might have been mistaken for minimum-security prisons somewhere in Southern California if it weren't for the terrible humidity and the occasional sapper attacks. No wonder, years later, many veterans had to study maps to find out precisely where they had once been sent to take lives and risk their own.

Herr, of course, was not being literal. By the time *Dispatches* was published in 1977, Americans had long regarded Vietnam not as a country so much as a metaphor for war—a war so disastrous and divisive and apparently endless that it did not seem hyperbolic to suggest that it had spread back across the Pacific to every American town and that everyone, at least politically and emotionally, had "been there."

Since the war, "Vietnam" has become even more Americanized. If you punch it into an Internet search engine you are flooded with sites about the American fallout from the war. To find something about Vietnam you're better off searching under "Vietnamese." For the past quarter century an astonishing portion of our public discourse about America's longest war, and first foreign defeat, has focused on whether American prisoners are still held captive in Vietnam, whether our political leaders dodged the draft or "served their country," and whether or not we have kicked the "Vietnam syndrome" (as George Bush insisted after the Persian Gulf War). Those debates, and others like them, have required such a high dose of fantasy, mythology, amnesia, and trivialization that even dozens of new scholarly books on recent American culture have not yet sorted it all out. Needless to say, most of our public invocations of "Vietnam" have taught us virtually nothing about Vietnam or the war we fought there. And just when it seemed that Bill Clinton's historic trip might be the occasion for a new sort of media coverage of Vietnam, the contested election in Florida buried the story.

After all of that, it is a surprising pleasure to read A.J. Langguth's *Our Vietnam*. A professor of journalism at the University of Southern California, Langguth covered the war for the *New York Times* in the mid-sixties and returned briefly on assignment in 1968 and 1970. During the past decade he has traveled to Vietnam five times to gather material for this book. He's a smart, savvy, and rather sly old hand. This long, detailed history, he suggests, is merely a "straightforward narrative" of the American war in Vietnam, an old-fashioned effort to tell a story without pretense or polemic. And so, on the surface, it is, taking us one year at a time, chapter by chapter, through such a long historical tunnel you begin to wonder if the book, like the war, will ever come to an end. But unlike American policymakers, Langguth persuades us that the cause is worthy and our effort will be rewarded.

Part of what keeps us reading is Langguth's eye for colorful anecdotes and his refreshing whimsy. While many historians marshal every

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detail to advance an interpretation, Langguth frequently pauses for little asides and vignettes that have no obvious instrumental value but nevertheless immerse us more deeply into historical reflection. Given his idiosyncratic additions to the major events, it is astonishing how much nuts-and-bolts history gets delivered, and how engagingly.

In addition to his narrative skill, Langguth succeeds precisely because he does have a point of view. Though not polemical, *Our Vietnam* clearly holds Washington almost wholly responsible for creating and prolonging the war. As one story builds on another you begin to feel the full weight of this vast American failure. U.S. intervention in Indochina emerges as an unmitigated disaster from the very beginning (excepting only that moment in 1945 when the U.S. briefly allied itself with the anti-French Viet Minh).

Langguth's history resides primarily in the centers of political power. Most of the drama occurs among officials in Washington, Saigon, and Hanoi, with side trips to Beijing, Moscow, Paris, and Phnom Penh. But Langguth makes enough forays into the jungle to remind us of the bloody consequences of all those meetings, dinners, task forces, consultations, fact-finding missions, and briefings. American officials were constantly flying "out there" to Saigon as if a few days of personal contact with the war zone might somehow turn the tide. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara once sent two men to Vietnam on a Friday and told them to get back to Washington by Monday with a brief in hand.

While much of the detail is soon forgotten, one of the themes to emerge most strikingly is the failure of U.S. policymakers to act courageously on their deepening pessimism about the war. Almost all of these men harbored private reservations about the capacity of America to prevail in sustaining a permanent non-Communist regime in South Vietnam. At one point or another, a surprising number produced memoranda laying out their doubts. But more significantly, Langguth shows how the culture of power, cold-war orthodoxy, and a desperate need to demonstrate individual and national strength, subsumed and transformed all internal dissent. A man would whisper his doubts, look to his colleagues for reassurance, wait for the fever to pass, rejoin the team, and within a matter of weeks, days, or even minutes endorse yet another round of American escalation.

A few American officials resigned in disgust, but without public protest. Only Daniel Ellsberg sacrificed his career in government, not only by speaking out against the war, but by giving the *New York Times* seven thousand pages of classified documents that showed American leaders had lied to the public about the war all the way back to the 1940s. Ellsberg had first-hand exposure to the deep gulf between private skepticism and public optimism. In 1966, for example, he accompanied McNamara home from Vietnam. By then McNamara was privately persuaded that the war was unwinnable. Just before the plane touched down in Washington, he told Ellsberg, "I say things are worse than they were

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a year ago." The plane landed and McNamara walked briskly to a group of reporters gathered around a podium. "Gentlemen," he said, "I've just come back from Vietnam and I'm glad to be able to tell you that we're showing great progress in every dimension of our effort."

There was virtually no bottom to the capacity of American war managers to justify their actions. When Nixon forced his aide Bob Haldeman to resign in 1973 he tried to ease the blow by saying: "Just remember you're doing the right thing. That's what I used to think when I killed some innocent children in Hanoi."

While Langguth makes clear in his title that his main focus is on "our Vietnam," what the Vietnamese call the "American War," we learn more about the Vietnamese here than in any other major survey of the topic. Relying on profiles of several dozen figures, he introduces us to Communist Party leaders in Hanoi, northern generals who fought in the South, southern revolutionaries of the National Liberation Front, diplomats who negotiated in Paris, the men who ran the American-backed government of South Vietnam, and the various non-Communist southern factions that posed, in their own way, as many problems for Saigon as the guerrillas.

The Vietnamese we meet are not anonymous victims, or fanatical ideologues, or spineless puppets, but complex individuals. Their voices add immeasurably to our understanding. For example, at one point the Americans were once again pressing Vietnamese diplomat Xuan Thuy to guarantee some concession if the United States were to stop the bombing of North Vietnam. He said that if the United States ceased the bombing, Vietnam would gladly promise not to bomb the United States.

That kind of saucy defiance did not amuse Henry Kissinger. To Richard Nixon he described the Vietnamese as "just a bunch of shits. Tawdry, filthy shits." But for real tawdry filth you could not do better than Kissinger's endorsement of the Christmas bombing of 1972—the most concentrated bombing attack of the war. Langguth convincingly demonstrates that its only purpose was to bolster the confidence of South Vietnam's Nguyen Van Thieu who had refused to sign the peace agreement worked out in Paris. Hanoi and Washington had already agreed on every significant detail. The bombing did nothing but kill more people. When negotiations were renewed, Kissinger returned to Paris, looked his Vietnamese counterparts in the eye, and said, "It was not my fault about the bombing."

Twenty-six years after the war, we are finally beginning to realize that to understand "our Vietnam" we have to learn more about the Vietnam we could not control. Vietnam Vietnam Vietnam, A.J. Langguth has been there, and we are all the wiser for his effort. □

Chris Appy *is working on an oral history of the American War in Vietnam that will be published by Viking Penguin.*

LOOK BACK IN ANGER

A Personal Odyssey
Thomas Sowell
The Free Press, $25, 308 pp.

An American Story
Debra Dickerson
Pantheon Books, $24, 285 pp.

Don Wycliff

Among all the stories in Thomas Sowell's *A Personal Odyssey*, two struck me as particularly revealing.

The first occurred in 1960 when Sowell, a thirty-year-old candidate for a Ph.D. in economics at the University of Chicago, was attending the annual meetings of the American Economic Association in Saint Louis in search of a job. "This was still the era of racial segregation in the South," writes Sowell, an African American, and Saint Louis was "a border state city with Southern practices."

Things went fine for him at the convention hotel, where the association had negotiated a nondiscrimination agreement. But one day while walking elsewhere in the city, he went into a restaurant where segregation prevailed. "The manager came over to the table to say politely and quietly that I could not be served there. I simply got up and left."

Contrast Sowell's reaction in that instance with his reaction in a second episode five years later in the New York City subway. He is sketchy about exactly what happened, and particularly about whether there was any racial component to it apart from the fact that a man who happened to be white stepped on his toes and refused to apologize.

Sowell quotes himself writing to a

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friend about the incident: "Fortunately, there was nothing bad about him but his intentions. However, I still suffered a swollen hand, a slightly sore shoulder the next day and blood spattered on my clothes." The antagonist's blood, he took pains to add afterwards.

I found these episodes interesting in light of Sowell's prominence over the last three decades as a "black conservative" commentator on—and critic of—traditional civil-rights leaders and their strategy of confronting entrenched white power.

Faced with a power structure and a political system that enforces racial inequality, as he was in Saint Louis, Sowell seems never to have been able to find a reason to challenge it—or to justify other black people in challenging it. Indeed, as late as 1962 he privately—and now publicly—expressed misgivings about the effort to desegregate public accommodations in the South, suggesting remarkably that "the blind preoccupation with this one thing seems almost pathological."

But let some hapless white guy mess up the shine on his shoes in the subway—in an incident that, for all anyone knows, may have been motivated by plain old New York boorishness rather than racial animus—and Sowell goes ballistic. Indeed, his willingness to resort to fisticuffs seems to have become for him a strange kind of proof of his bona fides as a black man. For example, writing of his youth, he notes at one point that "I do not recall ever losing a fight to a white kid my own size at J.H.S. 43." Later, in a reflection on the whole course of his life, he observes that "I grew up with no fear of whites, either physically or intellectually.... Many blacks during the 1960s (and later) were inordinately impressed with strident loudmouths whose chief claim to fame was that they 'stood up to the white man.' As someone who first decked a white guy at age twelve, and who last did it at age thirty-five, I was never really impressed by such credentials..." But if it doesn't mean anything, why mention it?

Context is everything in a memoir or autobiography. In most cases, an individual's life story is of interest to a gen-

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eral audience mainly because of what it tells of how the person dealt with, overcame, succumbed to, or accommodated external circumstances. Rare is the person whose story is so intrinsically compelling that the times, the places, the political and social circumstances of his or her life are unimportant or incidental.

Sowell obviously considers himself one of these rare ones. It is no accident that this book is named *A Personal Odyssey*. It is short on context and long on details about the main characters: "me," "myself," and "I." And if you don't like that, well, I suspect Mr. Sowell would be happy to step outside with you and settle the matter on the street.

He is probably most widely known as a black conservative newspaper columnist. Less well known is that he is a scholar, an economist who is a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, and the author of almost a dozen volumes on race, economics, and other weighty topics.

The stories in this volume he calls simply "vignettes." "Unlike some memoirs which 'tell all' (or perhaps more than all)," he writes, "these reminiscences are as selective as memory and as prudent as required by a concern for other people's feelings."

Selectivity of memory is one of the problems with the book. Time and again, from his earliest years to his most recent, Sowell presents himself as getting the best in arguments with foolish, less-intelligent antagonists. And invariably, his winning remark is too perfect; it has too much the ring of the quip we all wish later on we had been able to think of at the moment of confrontation.

No question that Sowell is a smart man—and that he apparently has the IQ scores to prove it. But even smart folks don't bat 1,000.

In going back over Debra Dickerson's *An American Story* in preparation for writing this review, I was surprised to realize that only about a third of it is about her family life and her growing up. I had supposed it was much more than that, because that is the most memorable part of the book.

On the other hand, that may also explain why the rest of *An American Story*—about Debra's decision to enlist in the Air Force, her "finding herself" in the military environment, her career and personal growth, her higher education—seemed, frankly, tedious. This despite Dickerson's awesome talent as a writer, so wonderfully graceful and colorful.

She went all too abruptly from relating the fascinating story of an American family of the great black migration, to relating a story of her navel-gazing efforts, to finding her place in the great American scheme of things. There are, nevertheless, enough saving graces to make this entire volume well worth any reader's investment of time and effort.

Dickerson's is an "up from" book, part of a tradition of black autobiographical storytelling that extends at least as far back as Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery*. Her context is the Great Migration, that vast mid-twentieth-century flight of some 5 million black Americans from Southern apartheid to relative freedom and prosperity in the North. In a statement that could have been made of

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my family or any of thousands of others, she writes: "No one could have foretold the havoc that the inherent contradictions between the way of life my parents brought with them from the South and the way of life open to us up North would wreak on our family. I've spent my whole life trying to avail myself of what's good about one way without closing the door on the other. After forty years, I've just about got it figured out. All that's best and worst about me derives from the fact that I'm a daughter of the Great Migration."

Dickerson is at her best describing growing up in her parents' household in Saint Louis. Actually, she is at her best describing her father, Eddie Mack Dickerson, the ex-Marine who never really ceased being a Marine, the refugee from the South who "brought Jim Crow with him," the family man who ultimately drove his family to flee him. Listen to some of what she says of him:

- "He lived his life at a slow boil, always on the verge of an eruption. His anger at life's unfairness (a.k.a. 'the white man') was a seething socket deep within him that he plugged into for energy and drive."
- "Though both my parents, like millions of black Americans, made a conscious choice to thumb their noses at Jim Crow by migrating, in the end only Mama was able to leave her anger at the Mason-Dixon Line. Daddy brought Jim Crow with him. He smuggled it in, a stowaway in his heart, an overstuffed duffel bag about to burst at the seams."
- "When we bent Daddy's rules, we did so with all the stealth of escaping slaves following the North Star."

It becomes evident after a time that the central figure of this book is, arguably, not Debra Dickerson but Eddie Dickerson. Or, rather, Debra's unresolved anger at, love for, need to please—or at least understand—her father.

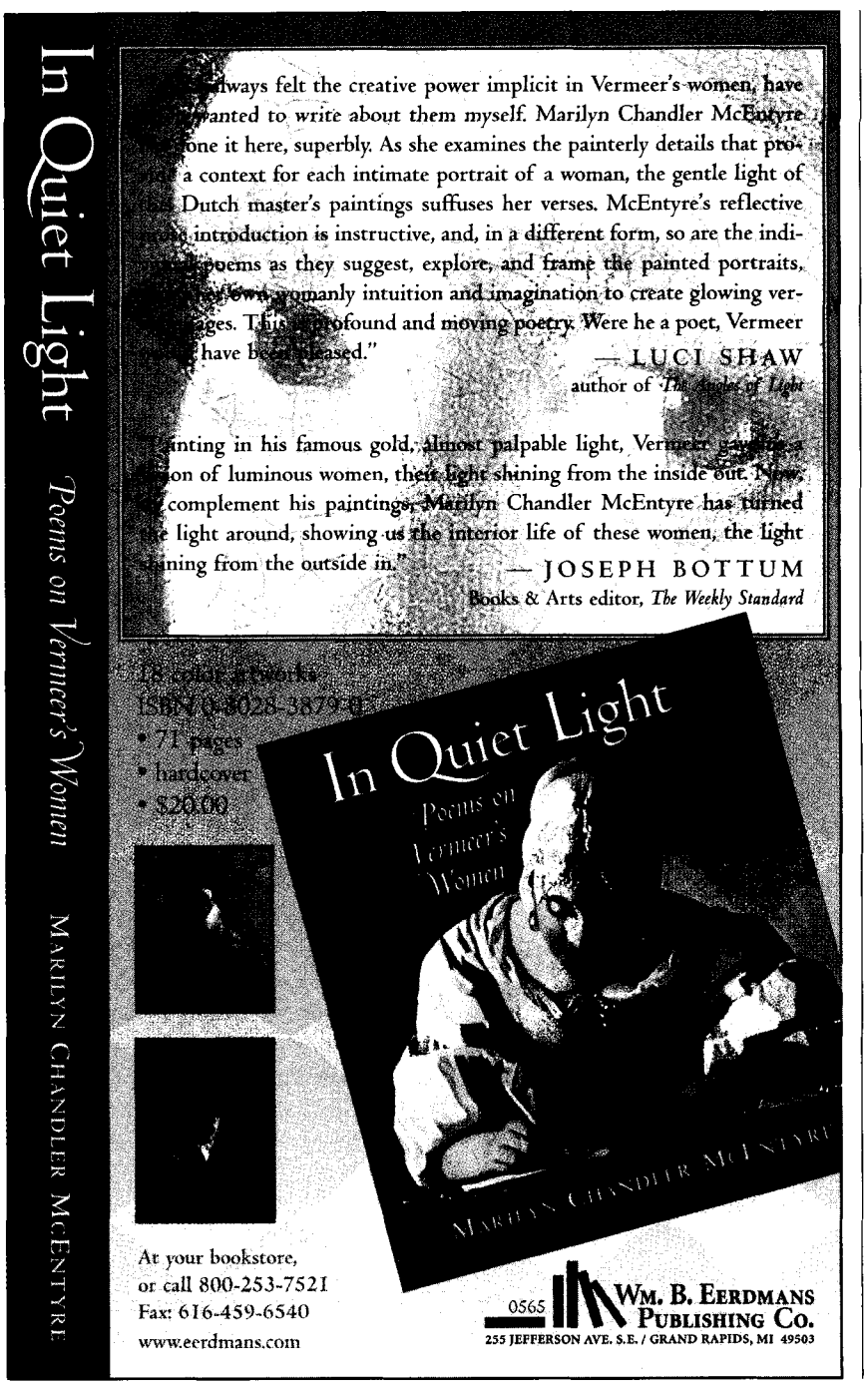
That resolution begins to take place after his death and through the unlikely agency of Debra's brother, Bobby. Bobby has lived what to his big sister looks like a pampered life. The result has been to turn him into a spoiled, helpless creature, living on the street because he lacks the discipline to pull himself together and achieve, as Debra has managed to do.

When Bobby is at his lowest, Debra, flush with her success as an Air Force officer, invites him to come and live for a time with her. She learns for the first time who her little brother really is, what he has endured, and why he has become the person he is. In the process, she begins to develop some of the same insights into her father.

The most fundamental of those insights may be that to be a black man in American society is to be "always on the verge of an eruption." And that would appear to be true of Thomas Sowell no less than of Eddie Dickerson. Strange that two men who couldn't be less alike politically and in socioeconomic status should have wrestled with the same dilemma.

Actually, it's not strange at all. Just part of the American dilemma, which is the ultimate American story. □

Don Wycliff *is public editor of the* Chicago Tribune.


In Quiet Light
Poems on Vermeer's Women
Marilyn Chandler McEntyre
lways felt the creative power implicit in Vermeer's women, have anted to write about them myself. Marilyn Chandler McEntyre one it here, superbly. As she examines the painterly details that pro- a context for each intimate portrait of a woman, the gentle light of Dutch master's paintings suffuses her verses. McEntyre's reflective introduction is instructive, and, in a different form, so are the indi- poems as they suggest, explore, and frame the painted portraits, owa womanly intuition and imagination to create glowing ver- ages. This is profound and moving poetry. Were he a poet, Vermeer have been pleased."
— LUCI SHAW
author of The Angles of Light
inting in his famous gold, almost palpable light, Vermeer gave us a on of luminous women, their light shining from the inside out. Now, complement his paintings, Marilyn Chandler McEntyre has turned e light around, showing us the interior life of these women, the light ining from the outside in."
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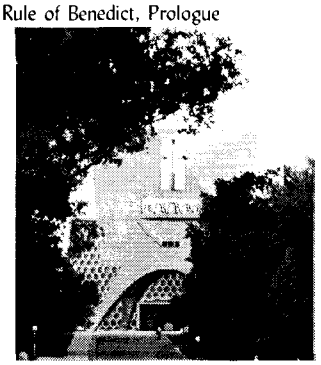

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CORRESPONDENCE

(Continued from page 4)

goodness of sexual pleasure" more than enough. Pope John Paul II has a specific message to convey, and there are at least two of us who think his message is right on.

RAY TOLOSKO
West Newbury, Mass.

Unfair to Carroll

I would like to take issue with Robert Wilken on some aspects of his review of James Carroll's *Constantine's Sword* (January 26, 2001). For one thing, Wilken says the book is "behind the curve of history." According to him, "its message has been heard, digested, and acted upon." Would that were true!

Granted, great strides have been made in the last few decades. Most informed Catholics, for example, now know that the Jews should not be held responsible for the killing of Jesus. Recent events, however, such as the beatification of Pius IX, the canonization of Edith Stein, the placing of the cross at Auschwitz, and the movement to canonize Pius XII demonstrate that the Catholic church as an institution still "doesn't get it." In the domain of Jewish-Christian relations, the church is even now capable of showing great insensitivity.

Wilken says that, according to Carroll, "Christians are guilty for being Christians," in other words that Christianity is essentially anti-Semitic. If this is true, then Carroll's book is worthless because it logically requires either perpetuating anti-Semitism or eliminating Christianity. Carroll does not say that all Christians must be guilty, though he does imply that Christians who live by a Christology centered on the Cross will have an anti-Semitic orientation.

Carroll proposes a different Christology. According to this alternative view, "the coming of Jesus was for the purpose of revelation, not salvation—revelation, that is, that we are all already saved." Those who see their Christian heritage in this light will not be anti-Semitic.

JIM COSGROVE
Wantagh, N.Y.

Gnarled roots

Professor Wilken's scathing review of *Constantine's Sword* appears deserved if Carroll carries his condemnation of Catholic (and by inference all Christian) anti-Semitism to the point of calling for what amounts to the end of the church. Since the Shoah, the change for the better of heart and voice of Christians toward Jews has been impressive. But can the lectionary readings from the Gospels and Acts that denounce "the Jews"—especially the Passion narrative of John—really be harmless, even in this enlightened age?

STANLEY A. LEAVY
Hamden, Conn.

Santa who?

Lawrence S. Cunningham, in his review of Hannah Green's *Little Saint* (January 12, 2001), states that Sainte Foy and Santa Fe are etymologically similar. But the name of the New Mexico city refers not to the Little Saint, but to the City of the Holy Faith, that name being chosen by Don Pedro de Peralta in the early seventeenth century to honor in turn the name of the city of Santa Fe in Spain, a siege city raised by Ferdinand and Isabella before the city of Granada in the late fifteenth century, Granada being the last stronghold of the Moors and the Moorish faith in Spain. There are many Santa Fes throughout the Southwest, all with the same name derivation. The cult of Saint Foy, as far as I know, was never established in the city of Santa Fe, New Mexico.

(REV.) G.F. WERNER
Edgewood, N.M.

The reviewer replies:

Hannah Green, in her book, makes the argument for Santa Fe being derived from the little saint, Foy. She may have over-reached her evidence (she traces the cult of the saint to the Iberian peninsula via the pilgrimage routes to Campostella and then, among other places, to the New World). If I am wrong (and I may well be) in repeating her assertion, I am grateful for the correction.

LAWRENCE S. CUNNINGHAM

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CROWD CONTROL

A.W. Godfrey

My wife died suddenly more than twenty years ago and I was left with seven children, five of them teenagers. After the funeral, I felt dreadfully alone, knowing I had a difficult job and no models to follow. Some friends avoided me, fearful that I might ask them to shoulder part of the burden. Others believed I would soon remarry just to get someone to help with the children. I did neither, but have had a lot of time to think about being a parent and about families in general. Long years' experience has led to some conclusions that are opposed to current thinking and rhetoric about families and the roles of men and women.

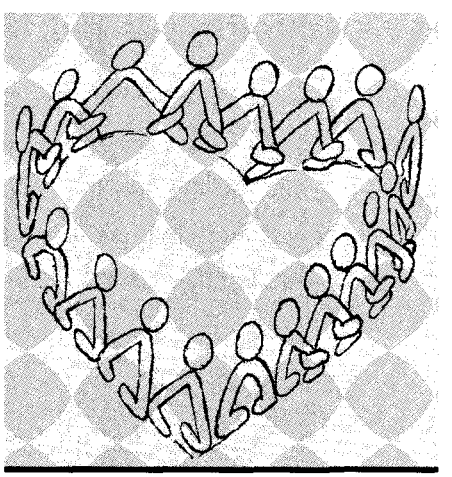
My first conviction is that large families are more supportive and build stronger characters and relationships among children than do small families. The second is that if there must be a single parent, in most cases strong male parents have certain advantages over female parents, if only because of how society as a whole perceives things.

All eight of us have survived. I still love and like the children, and am proud of them. We are all good friends. They continue to humor or bait me in ways that some consider irreverent. They still groan, "Oh, Dad," when I repeat a story—like this one—that they have heard more than once. I would not dare to claim that I have been a successful parent or the crucial ingredient in my children's lives, but they have turned out well.

Large families are now out of style or at least considered unaffordable by many people. Children have never been cheap to raise. Still, remember that the cost per child does go down as their number increases! So do aesthetic standards and the standard of living. However, the standard of ingenuity and socialization often goes up. I have found that children from other homes find the large family dynamic and attractive and want to hang around. In addition, parents of a large family usually know where the children are, even if they suspect some of the teenagers may be in the attic smoking cigarettes or pot, or drinking beer. The surveillance system in a large family is usually quite extensive.

A large family can also discourage selfishness. There is always one child who needs more attention than others and if the parents don't pick up the signals, the siblings will, usually with great generosity. Children in large families also learn to share. Money was always short when it came to providing multiple wardrobes and other things. Usually the first person up in the morning was the best dressed—having "borrowed" a sister's or brother's clothes, much to the irritation of late risers who couldn't find the favorite shirt or skirt they had purchased with their babysitting or yardwork money.

Once kids get past the early and scary phase of adolescence, they learn to tune in to their brothers and sisters and are inclined to help and advise, sometimes with disastrous results, but always with love and concern. For example, in our house negative reports from school were often intercepted by concerned siblings. This resulted in my being labeled an unconcerned parent by some teachers.



Many teachers did not make follow-up telephone calls because they assumed "that's the way men are." This is how I learned how schools stereotype children from single-parent households.

My next observation will probably irritate single female parents who have done a good job of raising families. Society still sees the male as the authority figure. Because of inequities in society, women make less money, which has a subtle negative effect on their authority. Fathers, besides, have fewer qualms about coming down heavily on errant children, which makes discipline easier. Men can even learn to be nurturing and to show emotion, although such learning does take time and sensitivity.

Permissiveness does not work in a large family because of the sheer limitation of time and the number of people involved. The pressure of earning a living every day means there is limited time at home to accomplish what needs to be done. I always felt meals were central, and dinner, served at six, was a mandatory family function. We didn't always talk pleasantly. Often there was fighting or complaints about the food. But we had to face each other at least once a day, en masse, which fostered a sense of community that has served us well. The sense of unity a large family develops often entails coming together against all opposition, even when a sibling is wrong. I have always liked that and I realized that if anything had happened to me, the family members would be able to take good care of one another.

My children are all married and have young children of their own now. As parents, they are much less rigid than I was and their families are smaller. That's fine. However, I do think large families deserve a better press. □

A.W. Godfrey *teaches in the department of European languages at SUNY Stony Brook.*

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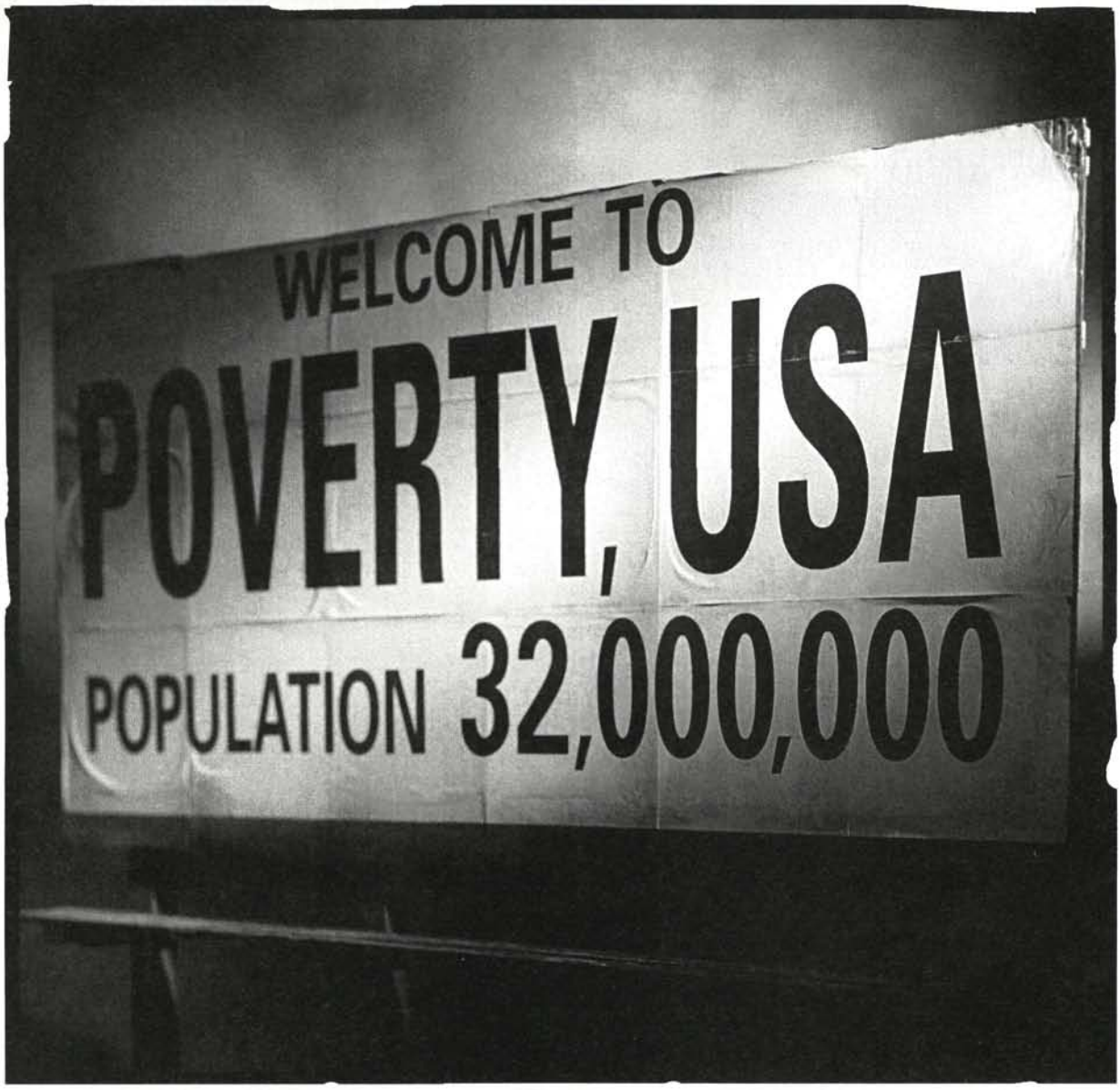

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